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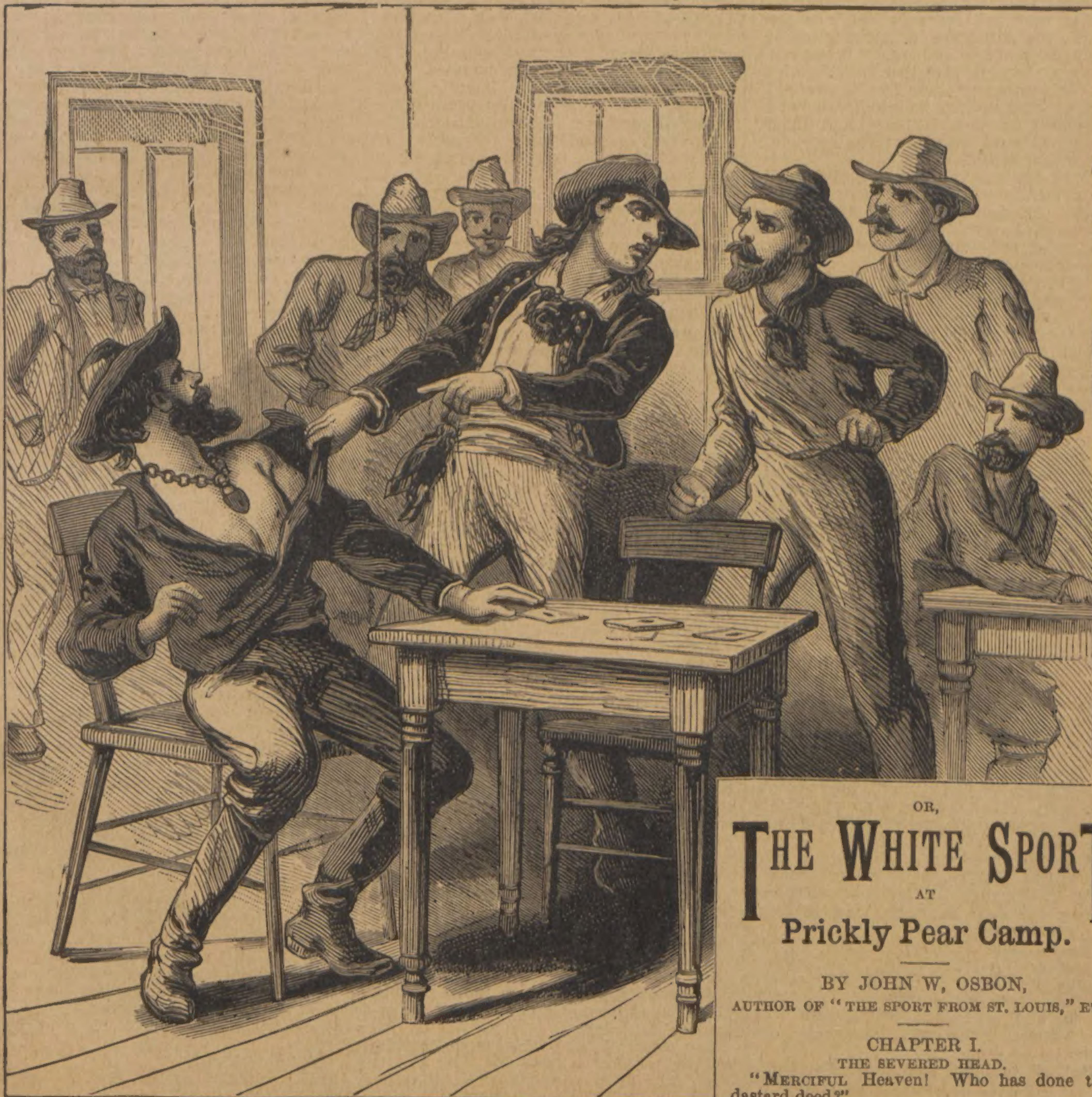
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Cool Greede, the Dead-Shot;



OR, THE WHITE SPORT AT Prickly Pear Camp.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,
AUTHOR OF "THE SPORT FROM ST. LOUIS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEVERED HEAD.

"MERCIFUL Heaven! Who has done this dastard deed?"

Grief and horror rendered the voice of Jaspar Fairfax thick and hoarse, and his fine face

"LOOK!" THE SPORT EJACULATED. "IT IS KENT KEENE, THE DESERTER CHIEF, AND HE WEARS THE TOKEN OF THE ACCURSED LEAGUE!"

grew livid as he gazed at the scene before him.

Ruin and desolation were indeed there, and the red glow of the rising sun disclosed palpable evidences of murder, most foul.

A narrow valley, fertile and grassy, watered by a small stream, and shut in east and west by parallel mountain ranges; on the eastern bank of the stream a heap of smoldering embers; near the embers, the lifeless forms of an old man, a youth of seventeen, and a negro.

Up the valley, or down, as far as the eye could reach, there was no sign of life.

Save that single grief-laden cry, and the rapid hoof-strokes of the speaker's horse, no sound had broken the deathly silence of that ill-starred spot in hours.

"Father! brother! Old Ned!—all gone! and Jess—where is she?"

That last thought roused the chilled soul of the man into action, and he sprang from the saddle.

Even in that moment, fraught as it was with sorrow and despair, his heart throbbed fiercely for vengeance, and he picked his steps with the skill of an Indian brave, that no betraying sign might be obscured.

A glance at the bodies showed that each unfortunate had been shot, then scalped, and with dry, tearless eyes, Jasper Fairfax turned to the smoking ruins of the cabin.

"If there, all trace is lost," he muttered, his dark blue eyes reflecting the lurid glow of the embers. "Better that, though, than the fate that would be hers as the captive of those Danite devils!"

A choking sob rose in his throat, but he resolutely crushed it back, and turned anew to the bitter task which cruel fate had assigned him.

With his gaze on the trampled earth, he circled slowly around the ruins, with each turn moving farther and farther away, until every foot of ground within a radius of two hundred yards had been closely scanned. Then:

"Ah! she lives! She is a captive!"

In strains scarcely audible, yet hoarse and full of menace, came those words, and bending low to lose no sign, Fairfax darted forward at a steady, tireless trot.

Across the stream, up the western slope to the level of the valley, thence in a direct line to a narrow pass in the mountain range, lay the course.

"They came through the pass, left their horses there while making the attack, and now have retreated as they came," he muttered, pausing in the shadow of the timber covering the range. "It is the work of the Deserter Chief's band."

Assured of the course, Fairfax turned, after a moment's reflection, and rapidly retraced his steps.

"That duty first, then Jess and vengeance!" he grated, his voice betraying both sorrow and passion.

The sun had touched the zenith ere Jasper Fairfax completed his task of burying the dead, and the shadows of the western range had almost reached the little stream marking the middle of the valley when he rose from his knees beside the heap of stones covering the triple grave, mounted and rode rapidly toward the pass.

A happy frontier home had been that of Nathan Fairfax, humble but comfortable, and joyous with the happy voices of Jessie, the only daughter, and Reuben, the younger son.

The secluded valley afforded a fair pasturage for the herds; the mining camps dotting both ranges were ready markets for the output of the little ranch, and peace and plenty had been the fortune of the quiet, industrious settlers.

But all was changed now; the home was destroyed, its inmates were slain or scattered, the herds stampeded. Ruin and desolation lay upon the valley.

And as Jasper Fairfax spurred forward

his chin sank upon his breast, and he wept.

Five-and-twenty was this elder son of Nathan Fairfax, fair haired and blue eyed, with regular, delicately molded features, and long, reddish-brown mustaches and beard. In height, less than six feet by three inches, he was broad shouldered and compactly built, with short, heavily-muscled arms and legs, his appearance hinting unusual strength rather than grace and agility.

Garbed more like a miner than a cowboy, yet with a trace of the latter in his make-up, he was armed with a repeating rifle, knife and revolver, and sat his horse like an expert.

It was current report among the camps that he was quick on the draw and a dead shot, and those who professed to know him best were wont to declare that he was an enemy to be dreaded, for, while brave unto recklessness, he was possessed of a high order of cunning, and had invariably succeeded in besting his opponent.

Gripping the reins tightly as he neared the pass, young Fairfax drew his left hand sharply across his eyes, to clear his blurred vision.

He knew full well the perils of that trail before him, and his fierce desire for vengeance and the rescue of his sister made him for the time forget his usual reckless daring.

Just within the pass, in a sheltered, pocket-like nook, the horses of the outlaws had been corralled, and a brief examination of the spot disclosed to the practiced eyes of the young trailer that they had been just ten in number.

"Odds enough, Heaven knows," Fairfax muttered, as he moodily scanned the trampled earth. "Yet, not odds too—"

Checking himself thus abruptly, he stared hard at a suspicious object which had caught his eye.

Close to the foot of the northern wall, in the yielding mold washed down from the heights above, was a patch of fresh earth more or less trampled, yet betraying signs of recent digging.

In size and shape this spot was not unlike a grave, though no tell-tale mound was there to mark it as such, and with a sharply-drawn breath Fairfax sprang from his horse and approached it.

A glance, and his belief was confirmed. "It is a grave, and was made last night by the Deserter Chief's band," he decided, bending low, and sharply scrutinizing the fresh mold. "Some one of them has paid for his crimes, and is planted here. Or—or, can it be—"

Again his voice failed him, and, appalled at the thought struggling for utterance, he recoiled sharply, only to spring forward the next minute, bowie in hand, and sink upon his knees.

"I must know!" he grated, hoarsely, each word uttered with an effort. "If Jess, better dead than living as the wife of that Danite devil!"

With feverish eagerness he plied the knife, scooping out the soft earth in a heap at the head of the grave, until the face of the corpse lay revealed, grim and ghastly, marked with a bullet hole in the center of the forehead.

A man of middle age, smooth faced and heavily built, was the tenant of the lone grave, and as Fairfax peered keenly at the heavy, brutish face, a sharp cry of surprise burst from his lips, and he grasped the corpse by the hair and gave the head a quick wrench.

A startling fact was disclosed.

The head had been severed from the body.

CHAPTER II.

THE MESSAGE.

Although a man of iron nerve, Jasper Fairfax had been sadly shaken by the ordeals of that day.

The grisly object in his grasp brought a shout of horror from his lips, and it was only by a supreme effort that he finally controlled his agitation.

"Ugh!" he ejaculated, as he placed the severed head upon the small heap of

fresh earth he had taken from the grave. "It is a grim meeting, Elephant Tom, and I little thought when we had that brawl at Prickly Pear Camp that we should next meet thus."

"But it has always been said you were a bad one, and now it does seem that you were all along a member of the Deserter Chief's band, and, as such, deserving of this fate."

Thus muttering, Fairfax stood gazing moodily at the severed head, his brows knitted in thought, his brain busy with a perplexing problem.

Why had the head been severed from the body? Surely the cause of death had been that bullet wound, and the shot must have been instantly fatal.

This was the problem puzzling Fairfax; and, anxious to solve the secret if possible, he turned from the head to the grave, to exhume the body.

His wonted steadiness of nerve had returned, and he set at the task before him with the cool deliberation of one with a fixed purpose in view.

In a few minutes the body of the dead outlaw was completely stripped of its light covering of earth.

A man of short but massive build had been Elephant Tom, and it required the full strength of Jasper Fairfax to lift that heavy form from the shallow trench.

The task accomplished, the avenger knelt beside the body and carefully examined the trunk and limbs.

No mark of violence was there, but the clothing was badly disarranged; the pockets were turned inside out, and the heavy blue flannel shirt had been carelessly cut away from throat and chest.

"That shot in the head killed him," Fairfax muttered, drawing back and wiping his dripping brow. "Why he was carried from the cabin here and his head taken off is a sealed secret, but one I shall surely solve."

"It was not done simply to secure some trinket of value, but to remove a tell-tale mark or token from the fellow's throat, and thus hide the identity of others concerned in this crime."

"Yes, yes! That is the real solution, and it points to a confirmation of that wild rumor that startled the camps a year ago and brands Prince Mars as an actuality."

"If such is the truth, then the Deserter Chief is not the guilty one, unless, indeed, he and Prince Mars are one and the same. The trail is before me, and time will tell."

Replacing the dead outlaw in the grave, Fairfax filled in the earth, mounted and rode onward at a rapid pace, determined to gain the western slope of the range ere halting for the night.

At times the trail was lost to view, owing to the flinty hardness of the pass; but the avenger, familiar with every bend and turn in those frowning walls, pushed steadily onward, confident that the outlaw band had not swerved aside ere reaching the western outlet.

That he had reckoned well was attested when he rode out from the shadows of the range into a narrow valley, just at sunset, for before him lay the trail broad and deep.

Straight across the valley it led to the narrow fringe of timber marking the course of a small stream, and with a single sweeping glance at his surroundings, Jasper Fairfax spurred forward.

Halting at the edge of the timber, he dismounted and tethered his horse, then, rifle in hand, plunged boldly into the shadows.

To the edge of the stream he hastened, noting even in the semi-darkness the broken and trampled undergrowth marking the trail.

"They camped here to give their horses a breathing spell and the men rest," he mused, his keen eyes piercing the gloom and noting the evidences of a hurried camp.

"Ah! a wickiup!"

True enough; under the spreading branches of an oak tree was a small brush shelter, the leaves yet green and fresh on the boughs, which the outlaws

had hastily thrown up for the use of their captive.

Nor was this all.

Securely pinned to the trunk of the tree, beside the open end of the wickiup, was a sheet of white paper, nearly eight inches square.

"It is a message!" exclaimed the young man, instantly divining the truth, and striking a match he leaned forward to examine it.

Written in pencil upon it, in a bold, round hand, were the following words:

"To Jasper Fairfax and others:

"You are warned to make no further pursuit. Disregard this warning, and you shall surely die.

"Miss Fairfax is with us, and shall remain with us until her release has been arranged.

"Our agent will make known our demands some time within the week, through some business man of Prickly Pear Camp.

"Be warned, and act in good faith, or it shall be the worse for the lady and yourself. (Signed.)

THE CHIEF.

"June 12th."

With eyes gleaming with hot and passionate anger, Jasper Fairfax read and re-read this message.

"The dastard!" he gritted, fiercely, detaching the paper and carefully folding it for future reference. "Does he think to bluff me, or simply to delay pursuit until he is safely across the Utah border?"

"As long as man can follow the trail, that long will I pursue him!"

Thus musing, he slowly retraced his steps, brought up his horse, removed saddle and bridle, and turned the tired animal loose to graze.

A half hour passed; then the full moon rose, lighting the tops of the distant peaks with mellow splendor, and down the valley, from far above, came the faint rattle of firearms.

Springing to his feet, young Fairfax hastened to the edge of the timber and gazed long and earnestly up the valley.

"Red work again!" he muttered, noting a deeper glow mingling with the moonlight miles above him. "Sunset Ranch, too, is doomed, and by the same merciless hand!"

Hastily saddling and bridling his horse, Fairfax mounted and galloped swiftly toward the distant firelight.

Mile after mile fell behind him. The simple glow gave place to a burst of flames, then that in turn died out, leaving naught but the moonlight to stain the distant peaks.

Onward, his horse quivering and trembling under that terrific strain, dashed the young avenger, with heart and brain aflame. If the outlaws were there, Jessie was with them!

Gradually his surroundings changed. The range on the east turned abruptly to the right, and broke off into low, irregular hills, while the level of the valley became rough and broken, and dotted here and there with clumps of timber.

One by one these fell behind the rider, until the last was reached. The air was growing heavy with smoke, and the scene of that cruel raid of the outlaws lay near at hand.

Abreast of that last bit of timber Fairfax uttered a sharp cry, and, deftly swinging his horse around at right angles to the course he had been following, he flung up his hand and fired.

A screech of pain greeted the shot; then the coils of a lariat circled through the heavy air and settled firmly around his shoulders.

CHAPTER III.

ROSA LEE.

"Keep your distance, Kent Keene, or, girl though I am, I shall fire, and fire to kill!"

"You have been warned—warned repeatedly, not to set foot or hoof upon the lands of Sunset Ranch, and you have taken your life in your hands in coming here.

"Go!—go at once, or your blood be upon your head!"

Sharply, incisively, the words cut through the evening haze, and the large black eyes of the speaker, a girl yet in her teens, flashed angrily, while the gold-mounted revolver in her slim brown hand was held on a dead level with a steadiness of nerve which would have excited the admiration, if not the envy, of a veteran frontiersman.

Mounted upon a wiry Indian pony, and garbed in a snug-fitting riding habit of dark blue, with soft, slouched black hat, plumed and looped up on one side with a diamond-studded star of gold, the girl certainly presented a dashing, a splendid picture when thus brought to bay in that narrow defile at the foot of the mountains.

So thought Kent Keene, as he gnawed savagely at his nether lip, furious with chagrin and vexation.

"Nonsense, Rosa! Don't be absurd!" he growled, his handsome, though dissipated, face showing only too plainly the state of his temper. "I don't come as an enemy, and you know it."

"You do not come as a friend!" the girl retorted, with a vivid flash of her black eyes. "Again, I tell—"

"I do come as a friend, and more—as a determined lover!" was the swift interruption.

"Listen, Rosa Lee! You are alone, powerless—helpless! Your father will not return from Prickly Pear Camp this night, and when he does come it will be to find the sweet flower of his old age missing, unless you comply with my demands—promise to become my wife!"

"Coward!"

The voice of Rosa Lee rang out, hoarse with dire ire, and the revolver in her hand cracked spitefully. Yet, swiftly as she had fired, her action was discounted by that of Kent Keene's allies, and the ball sped harmlessly across the level.

From the rear, out of the denser shadows of the defile in which they had been lurking, two desperadoes had softly stolen.

At the very moment that single word, so fraught with scorn and anger, burst from her lips, the coils of a lasso, skillfully thrown, settled over the shapely shoulders of Rosa Lee, jerking the weapon from her hand, while a second noose was drawn tightly around the neck of her pony.

Desperately the girl struggled to throw off that tightening coil, but Kent Keene spurred forward and in another minute her hands were securely pinioned at her back.

"Don't act a fool, Rosa!" the desperado exclaimed, his voice hoarse with exultation. "I swear by the soul of my mother no harm shall come to you, only—you must bend your will to mine and be my wife! Promise that, and you are free to go your way, and woe to the man who harms you or yours by word or act!"

"Never!" was the decisive response.

"Never—never!"

With a muttered oath the desperado turned aside.

"Your horses, boys!" he ordered. "We must mount and away."

Mutely the two ruffians darted away, and disappeared in the defile.

Pallid with anger, yet with never a tremor of fear, the beautiful captive sat upright in the saddle, her dusky eyes sweeping the broken expanse stretching away to the east, now rapidly growing dim in the gloom of twilight, while her ears were strained to catch every sound coming from the pass.

"Oh, if father would only come!" was the thought fiercely assailing her tortured brain. "His one word would send Kent Keene and his ruffians flying for their lives."

It was a vain hope, yet some subtle influence seemed to transmit it to the brain of the desperado, for he, too, bent his head and listened anxiously.

"It's no use, little girl!" he declared, grimly, at length. "I tell you the old man will not come this night, and I know!"

There was a dark significance under-

lying those last words, which Rosa Lee did not fail to detect; but, ere her tongue could utter the question trembling upon it, a new factor appeared upon the scene.

Around the jutting angle forming one jaw of the defile came a horseman, well armed and splendidly mounted, with a pack animal following at his heels.

"Hallo! hallo!" he hailed, sharply drawing rein, his deep blue eyes glancing suspiciously from the girl to her captor. "What's the row?"

"Help! oh, help me, sir!" cried Rosa Lee, and springing from her saddle she darted swiftly toward the stranger.

An oath came from Kent Keene, and with the lithe suppleness of a panther he dropped from his horse and bounded in pursuit.

But, swift as were his movements, he was distanced by the stranger, who had leaped from the saddle and with a series of magnificent bounds, placed himself between the desperado and the girl.

"Stand aside!" shouted Keene, hoarsely, his sinewy fingers grasping the handle of his bowie and flashing the blade in menace. "Meddler! you are courting death!"

"Well, it's not your kick, for we're old acquaintances," was the cool retort, and the knife of the speaker gleamed brightly as he drew it from the sheath in his belt.

Kent Keene halted, with an expression of mingled surprise and suspicion.

"Do you mean to say you are acquainted with the lady?" he demanded, savagely.

"Oh, no! not at all. Indeed, I think it is the first time I ever saw her.

"You remarked that I was courting death, and I simply informed you that I was well acquainted with that ancient dame, and that I didn't consider it any particular business of yours, anyhow. That was all."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN IN BUCKSKIN.

The stranger spoke in a subdued tone, his voice betraying neither anger nor excitement, and the desperado at once jumped to the conclusion that he was frightened at the prospect of a hand-to-hand encounter.

"You have made a big mistake in jumping into this thing," he asserted, in a blustering way, brandishing his knife as he slowly advanced. "The lady is in no danger at all; it is simply a lover's quarrel, and this interference upon your part is not only uncalled for, but extremely distasteful, and—"

"Oh, sir! that is all false!" interrupted Rosa Lee, turning appealingly to her deliverer. "He is a cowardly ruffian who has been warned to keep off our ranch under pain of death, and he comes now during my father's absence to steal me away. Beware of him, for he is a merciless wretch, with others within call. Mount and ride for your life, for he has murder in his heart, and will urge his wretched followers into doing that which he himself lacks the courage to do.

"Leave me—do not risk your life for me! They dare not harm me, and at the worst I can but die!"

While the girl was speaking the two men stood face to face, less than six feet apart, eyeing each other with the intentness of deadly foes upon the verge of mortal combat—the stranger cool and collected, his dark blue eyes glowing with the steady light born of a calm and determined spirit—the desperado quivering with passion, his face distorted, the evil glitter in his dusky orbs bespeaking only too plainly his fell purpose.

Nearly of one height were the foes, with perhaps an advantage of a half inch to the stranger, who was broad-shouldered and deep-chested, with trunk tapering gracefully to the thin flanks and trim, clean-cut limbs.

His arms were long and sinewy, with wrists broad and firm, yet supple as those of the expert swordsman.

His head, crowned with a thick growth of long, dark-brown hair, was handsome

and proudly poised, and well set upon a neck which a gladiator might have envied.

The projecting eyebrows, and firm, finely-molded chin gave an expression of strength and firmness to his beardless face, which was otherwise almost effeminate in its smoothness and regular outlines.

Somewhere near thirty, splendidly armed, and garbed in buckskin, with cavalry boots and black slouch hat, he looked every inch a dashing young plainsman, while a careful scrutiny of his face would have convinced one versed in human nature that he was one of deeds, not words.

And Kent Keene?

A handsome man, truly, somewhere near the age of his adversary, well built and heavily muscled, with the strength of a giant, but betraying in every feature only too plainly the ravages of that devil's potion, strong drink.

His form had lost those graceful lines and curves with which Nature had endowed him, and his eyes were bloodshot, his face flushed.

A drooping black mustache half concealed his sensual lips, and his closely-cropped black hair clustered in tiny ringlets over his broad, high forehead.

That he was a sport was attested at once by his bearing and his garb.

Clad in black velvet, with a crimson girdle or sash at his middle, a frilled shirt, slouched hat and high-topped boots on which were spurs of solid gold, he, too, presented an appearance as picturesque as dashing.

In grim silence the two men thus singularly brought face to face as foes eyed each other, until a full minute had followed the last word of Rosa Lee.

Then Kent Keene suddenly fainted and lunged forward.

The opposing blades met with a metallic clash, and the fight was on.

That the stranger in buckskin was no novice with the knife, the desperado soon discovered.

Out—slash—thrust, all were met with the coolness and dexterity of a master hand, and seemingly without exertion.

A graceful side-step, a sweep of that long and sinewy arm, or a supple turn of the wrist, and Kent Keene saw his most skillful strokes end in a simple shower of sparks.

Even to Rosa Lee, crouching behind a boulder less than a dozen paces distant, mutely praying for the deliverance of her bold champion, it speedily became apparent that the desperado was mere pastime for the unknown, and a long breath of relief escaped her quivering lips.

Baffled at every point, fully conscious that he was overmatched and wholly at the mercy of his antagonist, Kent Keene, while furious at the cool smile upon the stranger's face no less than at his own ill success, continued the unequal struggle with the sole hope that his allies, now overdue, might appear in time to lend a helping hand.

Then, swift as the lightning's flash, the man in buckskin dropped the defensive tactics he had followed from the outset and assumed the offensive.

Now here, now there, his knife flashed, pricking the skin of his adversary at will and drawing the blood in tiny rills; then came a sudden forward movement of bewildering swiftness—a harsh clash of blade against blade, and Kent Keene's weapon, hurtling harmlessly through the air, fell to the ground a dozen feet away.

White faced, utterly unnerved, his black eyes distended with horror, the sport cowered back, his breath coming and going in short, sharp hisses.

He stood in mortal terror, the revolver in his girdle utterly forgotten.

"Mercy! mercy!" he implored.

"Begone!" uttered the victor, coldly. "My knife is not for such carrion as you. The hang—"

"The lariat! the lariat! Look out!"

Sharply, shrilly that cry burst from the lips of Rosa Lee, and with a bound the girl was upon her feet, running toward her rescuer.

Too late came the warning! A dark coil circled through the purple air, and the noose settled firmly around the shoulders of the man in buckskin, jerking him off his feet.

A hoarse howl of exultation came from Kent Keene at this unexpected turn of affairs, and he bounded forward, clubbed revolver in hand.

Yet, swiftly as he moved, he failed to attain his end, for a single upward sweep of the stranger's keen blade severed the rope and left him free once more, to scramble to his feet and send a number of furious snap-shots into the covert whence the cast had been made.

Warned by yet another cry from the girl, the sport wheeled, and confronted Kent Keene.

The wretch stood with revolver cocked and leveled, but his nerve, so sadly shaken in the contest just ended, utterly failed him.

He turned and darted toward his horse, flung himself into the saddle and galloped swiftly away, to be followed a moment later by both his allies, all disappearing silhouette-like, across the face of the rising moon.

The man in buckskin turned to the girl whom he had so signally befriended, and, doffing his sombrero, said:

"Lady, they are gone."

"Now, if you will permit me, I will cut your bonds and see you home in safety."

"Certainly, sir," Rosa Lee replied, as the thongs parted and fell from her hands. "And you must remain until my father returns, that he may join his thanks with mine for the great service you have done me."

"But for you I would now be in that man's power, and I shudder to think what might have been my fate. So long as I live, I shall never forget you, nor your brave act."

"My father is Major Benson Lee. My name is Rosa."

Breaking off abruptly, the girl uttered a slight cry of surprise and alarm. Clutching the arm of her deliverer, she pointed into the defile, and in a voice tremulous with sudden terror, exclaimed:

"Look! look! It is the Specter of the Range!"

CHAPTER V.

THE SPECTER OF THE RANGE.

The apparition confronting the maiden and the man in buckskin was certainly one well calculated to put the strongest nerves to the test. It appeared, first, simply as a huge nimbus of pale, yellowish-green light, and seemed to come up out of the earth; for a half-minute it quivered and minkered and danced about, then slowly resolved itself into the shape of a skeleton horse and rider, both standing in fiery relief against the dense blackness of the defile in the rear.

A weird, unearthly screech pierced the balmy air of the calm June night, and the spectral forms darted swiftly and noiselessly away across the broken expanse and gradually faded from view.

"Isn't it horrible!" uttered Rosa Lee, in a voice betraying both wonder and awe, as she clung closely to the arm of her deliverer.

"Very," the latter returned, smiling grimly. "But, seriously, Miss Lee, do you believe such hobgoblins are supernatural—that they are the dead returned to earth?"

"Really, I do not know what to believe," replied the girl, with a short, nervous laugh. "There is something very strange about it all, though."

"But, do not address me as Miss Lee, please. Every one calls me Rosa, and you have certainly earned the right to do likewise, Mr.—"

"Creede Cool," supplied the man in buckskin, with a smile. "But, make it Creede, if you please, Miss Rosa—everybody calls me that."

Rosa Lee started and glanced quickly at the face of the man.

"Not Cool Creede, the sport?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I am so called, sometimes."

"Then, sir, I want to shake hands with you," the girl declared, with charming

frankness. "You are not a stranger at all, for I have often heard of you and your exploits through Jasper Fairfax, a neighboring rancher."

"Jasper Fairfax," ejaculated Cool Creede, warmly grasping the extended hand of the girl. "Do you mean to tell me, Rosa, that I am so near the Fairfax Ranch?"

"Oh, no; the Fairfaxes live full forty miles to the southeast, beyond the range shutting in this valley on the east. But, they are our nearest neighbors in that direction, and we frequently visit back and forth."

"But let us mount, Creede, and ride on down to the ranch, for it's poor fare and a grim welcome we'll get from the Donna Isabel if we are late."

Cool Creede nodded assent, and called up his good black horse, Star Face, with the trained pack-animal following, while a whistle from Rosa Lee brought her Indian pony galloping to her side, and in another minute both the man in buckskin and the girl were in the saddle, riding southward along the base of the mountain.

"This Kent Keene, who and what is he, if I may ask?" queried the sport, after several minutes of idle talk.

Rosa Lee's expressive face clouded.

"He is a mystery—an enigma," she returned, slowly. "But little is known of him by any one here, save that he lives without work and has money in plenty."

"Nearly a year ago he came to the ranch one night and asked for shelter, which was granted. He stated that he was from the East, and had mining interests in the various camps, but beyond that assertion offered no explanation."

"But it would seem, from popular report, that he is a card-sharp, who, banished from the more prominent mining centers, has come here to cheat the miners and cattlemen out of their hard-earned money. Certain it is that he has hung about the camps for nearly a year, making occasional trips to the more important centers, and once in a while disappearing altogether for a few weeks."

"Before his unsavory reputation had become generally known, he visited Sunset Ranch at times, but was finally ordered off under penalty of being shot on sight. I never understood the nature of the difficulty between him and my father until to-day, when the scoundrel had the audacity to ask me to become Mrs. Kent Keene, and upon my flatly refusing, attempted to carry me off."

"That is the full extent of my knowledge of the dastard, and it is my earnest hope that we may never meet again," concluded Rosa Lee, her black eyes flashing wrathfully.

"I do not wonder at your dislike for the fellow, all things considered," averred Cool Creede, gravely. "He is certainly a cowardly reprobate, and deserving of severe punishment."

"But let us change the subject and talk about something better worth it—the Specter, for instance."

"Oh, that, too, is enough to drive the sleep from my eyes this night," the girl cried, with a shiver of fear, real or simulated, and a swift glance over her shoulder, ending with an uneasy burst of laughter. "But, honestly, the Specter is a subject preferable to Kent Keene, so drive ahead, my good friend, Creede."

"Well, your idea of it? What is it?"

Rosa Lee's face became serious.

"I really am not prepared to say," she avowed, after a moment of deliberation. "Let me explain it all to you, and then, perhaps, you may be able to help me come to a conclusion."

"The Specter is of recent appearance, and was first seen, I believe, about two months ago, by a party of prospectors encamped in the mouth of a small gulch at the foot of the mountains some twenty miles to the north. They were nervy fellows, and made a bold stand, firing repeatedly at the hobgoblin as it dashed by, and then, determined to solve the mystery, made pursuit, but were easily distanced by the specter horsemen."

"Convinced that it was a cunning trick of outlaws, Indians, or others anxious to

drive them from that part of the range, they returned to camp and waited till morning, when the most skillful trailers in the party made an attempt to pick up the trail, only to find that the skeleton horse had left absolutely no trace by which he might be followed.

Two of the party, more superstitious than their fellows, declared the appearance of the Specter was an omen of ill, and at once packed up and started for the camps; but the others, five in number, were of sterner stuff, and declared their intention not only to stay, but to run down the Specter and clear up the mystery.

"On the night of the third day after the departure of the two men, the Specter again appeared, and was again fired upon and chased across the valley, three of the prospectors joining in the pursuit.

"At a point some miles from camp, the form of the skeleton horse suddenly vanished, leaving his rider, as it seemed, afloat in the air, yet fleeing with undiminished speed, until finally lost to view.

"Halting there, the three pursuers made a terrible discovery.

"On the plain, at their very feet, were their two whilom companions, who had started for the camps, both dead and mutilated almost beyond recognition.

"Horried at their ghastly discovery, the three hastily buried the dead and returned to camp.

"There another shock awaited them.

"On opposite sides of the fire, both dead and frightfully mangled, lay the two men who had remained at camp.

"How or by whom slain there was not a single clue, and, thoroughly alarmed, the three survivors of the ill-fated seven hastily broke camp and started East, determined to quit forever a region so infested with mystery, crime and terror.

"They stopped the first night at the ranch, and it was there I heard their story, and their belief in the supernatural character of the Demon Horseman was firm and unshakable.

"Since then the Specter has appeared to others, while in each instance a terrible tragedy has followed, and some hold to the theory that the Demon Horseman is himself the slayer, while others contend that his appearance is simply a warning of danger, which should be heeded.

"Now, Cool Creede, you have heard the frightful story of the Specter of the Range, and you must form your own conclusion, for I know not what to think nor what to say, save that I am not a believer in the supernatural, and thus must hold these mysteries to be of human agency.

"But you can understand why I am alarmed and uneasy, for coupled with the Specter's appearance was Kent Keene's significant assertion that my father would not return to-night."

CHAPTER VI.

TETON TOM'S WARNING.

The sport, deeply impressed by the girl's graphic recital of the tragic story, pondered a moment, then spoke, saying:

"It is, indeed, a strange tale, Rosa, and, coupled with the ghostly appearance of the Demon Horseman, one well calculated to arouse all of superstition there is in one.

"But I have never believed that the spirits of the dead return to earth in visible guise, and must, therefore, hold, with you, that this thing is of human agency—a subtle trick to arouse the superstitious fears of the miners and ranchmen in furtherance of a purpose unknown to us, but which I propose to know, for I shall make these mountains my stamping-ground until I have learned the truth."

"Oh, sir, it is a dangerous thing to do," exclaimed Rosa Lee, her black eyes dilating. "At this very moment the mountains are the headquarters of two outlaw bands, while there are many prowling Indians ready for any deed promising scalps or plunder."

"Yet, Rosa, it was this very state of affairs which brought me here," Cool Creede declared, with a reassuring smile. "A great deal of trouble has been caused

lately by the Deserter Chief and his band, while Silver Sam, the Shoshone, is also very much in demand by the authorities, and if I mistake not we shall find that the Demon Horseman is the agent of one or both bands."

Rosa started and involuntarily drew rein.

"That may be the exact truth, Cool Creede," she exclaimed, with a peculiar thrill in her soft voice, due partly to excitement, partly to fear. "And, such being the case, is it not possible that Kent Keene is also an agent of the outlaws?"

"Not only possible, but highly probable, Rosa," the sport returned, checking his horse. "Indeed, when I put together what I knew, and what I have just learned, the inevitable conclusion is absolutely startling!"

"Kent Keene is the Deserter Chief!" Uttering a sharp cry, Rosa Lee reeled in the saddle, and but for the promptly given support of the sport's arm, would have fallen.

"My father!" she moaned. "Merciful Heavens! Creede, what if—"

"I think you need have little fear on that score, Rosa," interrupted the sport, reassuringly. "Unless I have been misinformed, the greater part of these valleys are now being patrolled by volunteers from the ranches and camps. Such being the case, Kent Keene, despite his covert threat, would have little or no chance to intercept or otherwise molest your father!"

"Let us hasten on to the ranch!" the girl exclaimed, righting herself in the saddle and grasping the reins with feverish anxiety. "In any event, it will do no harm to send a number of the men to meet him, and it may ward off danger."

Cool Creede assented, and in another minute the two were riding forward at a gallop.

But Rosa Lee was not to enter the gates of the ranch that night, nor ever again!

Destiny, the implacable arbiter of fates, had marked out for the beautiful girl a new path, rough and tortuous, and leading through deadly perils.

Ten minutes of hard riding carried the two to the foot of a jutting hill, and as they swerved sharply around to the east the sound of rapid firing and shrill war-whoops was borne to their ears by the soft night air.

Around the spur and out into the open they dashed, Rosa Lee with bloodless face and terror-distended eyes, the sport cool and collected, his deep blue orbs aflame with the light of battle—around the spur and out upon the level, to draw rein sharply, fiercely.

The sky to the south was red with flames—the air quivering with the sounds of deadly strife.

"Good God! they have fired the ranch!" uttered the hapless girl, in a voice hoarse with contending emotions, her eyes fixed upon the burst of flame and the riders circling around and around it.

"Poor father! all is lost!"

Then something moved, slowly and painfully, in the rank grass at the foot of the spur, and a moment later a white, blood-stained face was lifted into view.

"Rosa! Rosa! for God's sake, gal, ride fer Prickly Pear Camp!"

"Silver Sam, the Shoshone, hes—hes—"

That was all. The head, with its message unfinished, drooped limply, and disappeared.

With a bound Rosa Lee cleared her saddle and ran to the side of the fallen man, closely followed by the sport.

The magnificent form of a tall cowboy, death stricken, lay in the grass, and with tears springing from her black eyes, Rosa Lee turned to Cool Creede.

"It is Teton Tom, the ranch foreman," she said.

CHAPTER VII.

AT BAY IN THE MOUNTAINS.

Mutely the sport sank upon his knees beside the fallen ranchman, and during the next minute his skilled eyes and hands were busy.

"Poor fellow! he is dead," he announced, as the result of that brief ex-

amination. "The wonder is that he was able to lift his head and speak, for he was hard hit."

"Now, Rosa, if you will stand guard against the near approach of this Silver Sam and his fellows, I will do all that can now be done for Teton Tom, and then we must make the ride to Prickly Pear Camp, for the ranch is now in the hands of the outlaws."

Silently the girl drew aside, and by sheer strength of will dried her streaming eyes. Frontier bred, she knew her duty was to the living, just then—to herself, her father and the man who had so gallantly come to her assistance.

And as she gazed steadily at the blazing ranch and the restless bevy of outlaws swinging wildly around it, her blood grew hot with anger and her heart throbbed fiercely with resentment.

Cutting loose and turning back a long section of the tough sod at the foot of the slope, Cool Creede hastily scooped out a shallow grave, throwing the surplus earth upon his blanket and carrying it to a distant thicket, that no tell-tale mound or heap of fresh earth might mark the resting place of Teton Tom, and reveal it to his foes.

That done, he removed the dead man's belt of arms and took from his pockets such valuables and trinkets as he had possessed; then, with a murmured prayer, carefully placed the body in the trench, filled in the loose earth, and skillfully turned back and smoothed down the sod, so that not a trace remained to mark the spot.

The contents of the dead man's pockets he rolled into a small parcel and handed to Rosa Lee, together with the cartridge belt and rifle, while the revolvers, freshly charged, he placed in the holsters on his saddle, pending that ride to the mining camp.

"Let us mount and away, Rosa," he suggested, after carefully sweeping the plain with his night glass. "A number of the outlaws have struck Teton Tom's trail, and are riding this way along the foot of the range, and every minute here adds to the chances against our reaching Prickly Pear Camp."

Silently nodding assent, Rosa Lee handed the sport the rifle, then leaped lightly into the saddle, and in another minute the two were retracing their steps, to throw the jutting spur between them and the keen eyes of the outlaws.

But, swiftly as Cool Creede had worked, it seemed that hurried, cautious departure would go for naught. A single sharp yell from the rear announced that one, at least, of the outlaws hovering on the trail of Teton Tom had sighted the fugitives, and Rosa Lee turned uneasily to her companion.

"That yell means mischief!" she exclaimed.

"At the least, it means we are discovered, and must expect pursuit," was the grave response. "With the night dark, it would signify little; but with the moon at the full and our horses jaded, it clearly determines the alternative before us. It simply gives us our choice of making a running fight or risking all on a bold stand."

"Or taking directly to the mountains," quickly added Rosa Lee.

"That should be our last resort, just now, for with the hills infested by outlaws and renegade Indians it would likely prove little better than a leap from the frying-pan into the fire."

"No, no! Rosa; let us first try a bee-line for the pass, and through the pass to the camp. If the way is clear, we may win through; if not, we'll do the best we can."

During this brief exchange of ideas, the horses had been swinging along at a rapid pace, holding as close to the foot of the range as the nature of the ground would permit; but even as that last word passed the sport's lips, he abruptly drew rein.

"Look!" he exclaimed, with a wide sweep of his hand as the girl checked her horse. "See, Rosa! we are hemmed in, and the adoption of your suggestion is

now our only hope. We must take to the mountains!"

True enough, as was evident to Rosa Lee at a glance.

Far out in the plain, yet distinctly visible in the now brilliant moonlight, was a long line of horsemen, nearly a score in all, riding four or five hundred yards apart, and extending from the foot of the mountain outward in a sweeping, irregular curve.

That they were members of the gang attacking the ranch neither Cool Creede nor his fair charge could doubt, for here and there in that long, gradually-contracting crescent could be descried the form of an Indian brave, his nodding plumes in marked contrast to the slouched hats of his white fellows, yet hinting strongly at the leadership of the notorious red renegade, Silver Sam, the Shoshone.

"It's the mountains, little girl, sure enough," uttered the sport, with grim nonchalance, his eyes turning from that grotesque line to the face of his beautiful companion. "I must give Silver Sam credit for knowing his business. He has had those fellows posted, no doubt, at the point where the stage trail touches the mountains, with orders to move down at a certain time to intercept fugitives from the ranch. If so, we have in reality been hemmed in for the last hour, and it will take tall kicking right now to break through his net.

"Luckily, they don't seem to have seen us, as yet, and if there is a break in the hills—"

"This way!" uttered Rosa Lee, commandingly, as she pulled her pony's head sharply to the left and urged him forward. "There is no break this side of yonder line, but our horses can find a footing here, and just above the timber line is a place I have heard my father say one man could hold against a thousand, if driven at bay."

"Good! That will be better than a clean pass back into the mountains," returned Cool Creede, cheerily, and with a word to Star Face, he followed the girl.

But that move on the part of the fugitives had not escaped detection, as a shrill yell now announced, and a backward glance disclosed that slowly moving line breaking into sudden activity.

"Let them yell!" Rosa Lee remarked, following the tortuous course she had marked out with an ease betraying thorough familiarity with her surroundings. "At the worst they can hardly more than push us closely, and once we reach the rocks we can drive them back."

The sport looked at the girl admiringly. "Clear grit, and as beautiful as brave!" he mused. "For her sake, at least, I hope this thing may pan out well. But it looks bad—mighty bad!"

Slowly the horses plodded upward, until nearly an hour had elapsed, then emerged from the shadows of the timber upon a scene of wild, weird beauty.

Above lay huge masses of cold, gray rocks, piled one upon the other, the silvery sheen of the moon softening and chastening the harsh angles of the bold spurs and jutting crags, and investing all with a sense of peaceful quiet.

Below stretched the black shadows of the timber, the moonbeams filtering through the interlacing branches, and falling in odd shapes and figures on the mountain side.

And up from this slope, so grotesquely mottled with light and with shade, came the sounds of fierce, hot pursuit.

CHAPTER VIII.

SILVER SAM, THE SHOSHONE.

Glancing back at the sport, Rosa Lee uttered a sigh of relief.

"We shall make it," she remarked, suddenly swerving from the direct, upward course she had been following, and heading for a narrow rift in a precipitous wall near by. "There will be little time for defensive preparations before Silver Sam's men appear, but I think we may safely trust to the natural advantages of the position.

"Now, follow me, not too closely, and

let your horse pick his way, for the path is one to try the nerves, and a false step means death."

Thus speaking, the girl gave her pony free rein, and entered the rift, Cool Creede following at a distance of a dozen paces.

A few rods thus, then the right-hand wall ended in an abrupt descent of hundreds of feet, while the rift, bending back in a sharp angle, opened upon a narrow shelf or "bench," running along the face of the mighty cliff midway between top and bottom, and barely wide enough for a bridle path.

With cool head and steady hands, Rosa Lee guided her pony upon this dangerous roadway, then loosed the reins and slowly rode forward, undaunted by the yawning abyss at her feet; onward, perhaps fifty yards, then disappeared around another angle in the cliff.

Following as closely as he dared rode the sport, while behind him came the pack horse, the iron shod hoofs of the animals ringing out sharp and clear as they fell upon the solid rocks.

Thus onward, until the angle was left behind, when the peculiar formation of the cliff became apparent.

Straight as a bee flies ran that perilous path from this second angle to a point fully two hundred yards away, there to bend back on the opposite wall, forming a huge V, and disappearing behind a rampart of massive boulders.

Silently the two rode on, passing in safety around the sharp curve at the inner end of that peculiar recess in the great wall, then upon the gradually widening ledge to the shelter of the boulders.

"There is a cavern near," explained Rosa, as she drew rein and dismounted.

"It is just back of the boulders yonder, and if you think best to put the horses out of the reach of stray bullets, I will stand guard."

"The suggestion is a good one," returned the sport. "Indeed, the first move upon the part of the outlaws will likely be an attempt to dismount us, for afoot the chances would be against our ever reaching Prickly Pear Camp. I will get the animals out of danger at once."

In another minute Rosa Lee was alone. Assuring herself that the magazine of Teton Tom's rifle was filled and in working order, she took up a position behind a boulder and carefully scanned every foot of that perilous path she had just traversed.

Every nook and corner was distinctly visible in the bright moonlight, and with a breath of relief the girl turned her attention to the angle beyond which, owing to that peculiar bend in the wall, the terrace was invisible.

"That is the point to be watched," she muttered, restlessly fingering the lock of the rifle. "If the outlaws discover that we have come here, they will certainly attempt to follow, and our first object must be to keep them from passing the angle."

"That is it exactly, Rosa," Cool Creede averred, catching the low-spoken, earnest words of the girl as he silently approached. "That angle is the key to the situation, and must be closely guarded. They will have to pass it singly, and we shall see them before they can see us, and it will be strange, indeed, if they succeed in crowding upon us."

"Indeed, our position seems well nigh impregnable, and with food and water we should be able to withstand a regular siege."

"But, unhappily, we have neither," returned Rosa Lee, with a faint smile. "My idea has been to make a stand here and beat them back, if possible, or, failing that, give them a lesson that will make them slow to follow us; then slip away and push back into the mountains."

"There is a way, then—"

"Yes, the terrace grows wider just beyond the cavern, and finally leads down into a narrow valley, said to be the headquarters of the Deserter Chief."

"Then may not Silver Sam's men swing around and attack us from the rear?"

"If given time, yes; but it is a long ride,

and before they can reach this point we should be out of the valley and halfway to the mining camp.

"But—hark! They come!"

The murmur of voices came to the fugitives, and the next minute the form of an Indian warrior appeared at the angle.

"It is the chief himself—Silver Sam!" announced Rosa Lee, in a low voice.

A moment the savage stood motionless as a statue, his keen black eyes searching the V-shaped terrace; then his gaze settled upon the boulders, and shielding his lips with his hands, he uttered the hail:

"Hullo! hullo!"

Promptly Cool Creede stepped into view, rifle in hand.

"Hullo!" he returned, laconically.

"What have you done with the rancher's daughter?" the Shoshone demanded.

"The rancher's daughter is in the hands of friends."

"'Tis false! But a moment ago she was with you. Where is she now?"

"She is where you cannot reach her!" was the cool reply.

"Act not rashly!" exclaimed the chief. "I am the rancher's friend, and I would save his daughter from her enemies. Speak with a straight tongue, and all will be well."

Rosa Lee appeared from behind the boulders.

"I am here, Silver Sam!" she cried, in a ringing voice. "And my friend has said the truth—you cannot reach me!"

"Go back to your skulking braves and tell them to try to take us at their peril!"

"You have lied, and in your treacherous heart you know it! You are not my father's friend—you are not the friend of any honest white man!"

"There has long been a price upon your head, but this night's red work has wrought your doom, for you shall die!"

And, swift as thought, the girl flung up her hand. A revolver gleamed in the moonlight, and as its sharp and spiteful crack awoke the echoes of the surrounding crags, Silver Sam, the Shoshone, reeled blindly toward the verge.

CHAPTER IX.

SIX STALWART OUTLAWS.

In the very shadow of death was the red renegade when that swift snap-shot from Rosa Lee rang out, and naught but the alertness of his nearest follower saved him from the doom he so richly merited.

Stunned by the bullet, which had cut an ugly furrow in his scalp, the chief staggered blindly and lurched forward, only to be deftly dragged back from the verge by the man behind him.

"A close shot, but a little high, I judge," remarked Cool Creede, as the chief disappeared around the angle. "Come, Rosa, get back to cover, for if I'm not greatly mistaken they'll try their hands in the next few minutes, and my word for it, you'll be the especial mark singled out."

"I do not doubt it," laughed the girl, bitterly. "I only regret that my aim was not truer, for I would have rejoiced to rid the border of Silver Sam."

"He is a dangerous redskin," the sport observed, as they again ensconced themselves behind the boulders, rifle in hand. "It is strange, too, for if I am not misinformed he is an educated Indian and wealthy."

"Oh, yes; he is a graduate of an Eastern school," Rosa returned. "But education hasn't changed the nature of the brute—say, rather, that it has simply enlarged and developed his capacity for devilry and added to his vices."

"As to his wealth, he was, a few years ago, worth a good many thousand dollars; but the gambling table has swallowed all, and it is to recoup his losses that he has openly turned outlaw."

"That is the way of man," Cool Creede remarked. "It is simply the old story—the card-table, debt, crime, and then death by bullet or rope."

"I suppose so; but isn't that rather peculiar talk for one of your profession?" queried Rosa, frankly meeting the gaze of the sport.

"Oh, no!" and Cool Creede laughed lightly. "It is a fact, though, which has helped me 'fall out with my calling,' as the old phrase goes, and I'm hunting a chance to go into some legitimate business. Not, mind you, that I regard my present occupation as either dishonest or dishonorable, for in my humble opinion an up-and-up, square sport may be as true a man as walks the earth; but there are many black sheep in the sporting fold, and the godly are wont to judge all by the blackest in sight."

"Yes, that is true, I know. But I wish to assure you, Creede, that at Sunset Ranch we have never judged you in that way. Father has great faith in Jasper Fairfax, and Jasper, as you doubtless know, is a firm friend of yours."

"Bless him! yes!" averred Cool Creede, his big blue eyes glowing warmly. "We've spent many an hour together, and a truer man never walked. And I may say, Rosa, that I was on my way to the Fairfax ranch, in response to a letter from Jasper, when I encountered you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. It seems that a secret report was sent through the camps and over the ranges to the effect that the outlaw bands of the Deserter Chief and Silver Sam had joined hands with Prince Mars, the Danite, for the purpose of subjecting this part of the border to a general raid, in furtherance of some scheme of the Saints."

"The date of the attack was not known, but steps were afoot to meet it, and I brought with me a dozen picked men to aid the miners and ranchmen, leaving them on their way to Prickly Pear by the upper trail, while I came on down the valley to seek Jasper."

"But I fear that we are too late—that the raid is on."

"There is every reason to believe so," returned Rosa, with a profound sigh. "Camps and ranches are infested by spies, and, alarmed by the information they have furnished him, Prince Mars has probably hastened the stroke, to discount the movement against him."

"That is it, exactly," Cool Creede averred.

"But this Prince Mars, the Danite—is anything positive known of the existence of such a person?"

"Oh, yes; such a person exists, though but little is known of him. It is said that he has his headquarters in the mountains somewhere to the south, and that he is high in the councils of the Church. It is also current talk that he frequents the mining camps in disguise, seeking recruits for his band."

"How long has this talk been going on?"

"Something more than a year, though it would seem that he has been operating in the guise of an outlaw, seeking to terrorize the frontier and thus drive Gentile settlers and intending settlers from this part of the border, for a considerable time."

"If you remember, in May last the camp of Red Gulch, nearly a hundred miles below, was raided, and a number of miners killed or wounded. At the time it was supposed to be the work of an ordinary outlaw band. Pursuit was made, and the miscreants overtaken and completely routed, though none were killed outright, and but one of their number was fatally wounded."

"This fellow fell into the hands of the Vigilantes, and from him they extorted a partial confession. Before the full truth had been learned, however, he was killed by a shot from ambush, and, believing that the outlaws were returning, the Vigilantes mounted and charged, only to find that their enemies were miles away, in full flight."

"It was on their return that the most singular and terror-inspiring discovery was made."

"The head of the dead outlaw had been completely severed from the body."

"Why it was done, or by whom, was a mystery, and is yet a mystery unsolved. This occurrence has added much to the terror inspired by the name of Prince

Mars, and to-day he is the most feared and dreaded man in all this region."

Cool Creede had listened most intently to the words of the beautiful girl, and now a peculiar expression crossed his handsome, beardless face.

"It is a singular—"

"Aha!"

Swift as thought the heavy repeating rifle of the Dead-Shot Sport leaped to his shoulder, and as the shot rang out a death-yell came from the angle across the abyss, and a red-skinned outlaw pitched head first into the depths.

"Keep down, little girl!" Cool Creede exclaimed. "That fellow was trying to throw a bullet or two our way."

"The next move will be to try a rush, to draw out attention, while two or three remain at the angle to pick us off."

Scarcely had the sport finished speaking, when the truth of his words was verified.

Around that deadly angle, in single file, sprang six stalwart outlaws, two red and four white, while a seventh, partly sheltered by the jutting rock, leveled his rifle at the sport.

But the border craft of Cool Creede was more than equal to the cunning of the savage and outlaws. Again his gun spoke and so quickly that it seemed as if he had not aimed; yet, a second death-yell announced that the bullet had sped true, and the luckless wretch followed his comrade into the abyss, the weapon clutched in his hands gleaming brightly in the moonlight as he whirled over and over.

Then, with a sudden swerve of his rifle, the sport covered the foremost of the six outlaws running along the ledge, and once more the heavy detonation awoke the echoes of the crags.

Down upon that narrow shelf of rock went the Shoshone, his right leg broken at the hip; down, to slip almost over the verge and then save himself by getting a firm grip on the edge of a crevice parting the rock.

CHAPTER X.

THE DEMON HORSEMAN AGAIN.

At that juncture, Rosa Lee, despite the sport's warning, opened fire, her repeater ringing out three shots in rapid succession, and when the tiny cloud of smoke had lifted it was seen that but three of the outlaws remained upon the ledge, and they had turned and were running madly toward the angle.

"No quarter!" gritted Cool Creede, as his rifle flashed again and again, until the sole survivor had gained the shelter of that unyielding wall of rock. "They deserve death, every one of them, and to show mercy is simply to seal some helpless settler's doom."

"That is the plain truth, well said, my brave friend," declared Rosa Lee, her dark eyes glowing vividly. "It is no time to think of mercy, save the kind they show—quick death!"

In silence the two refilled the magazines of their weapons and resumed their vigil.

No sound came to betray the movements of Silver Sam and his men, yet both Rosa and the sport felt confident that the end was not yet.

The Shoshone was not one to abandon a trail, and the sole effect of that bitter repulse would be shown in his more dogged persistence and increased vindictiveness.

But the keen wits of the sport were at work to evolve a plan of escape, and when a half hour had elapsed he suddenly broke the silence, saying:

"I see the way to do it, Rosa, and win clear of Silver Sam, if all works right."

"Keep under cover and let no one pass the angle."

Nodding her head in acquiescence, Rosa settled herself in a comfortable position, while Cool Creede put down his rifle and hurried toward the cavern.

When he returned he bore in his arms a bundle of dry wood. With a parting caution to the girl, he passed from behind the boulders and out upon the ledge, his keen blue eyes eagerly seeking a crevice in that narrow, perilous path.

Not until he had neared the point of that singular V was his anxious gaze rewarded. Then a chuckle broke from his grimly set lips, and his face relapsed.

Close in against the foot of the cliff the ledge was marked with a long, irregular seam, ending in the very point of the V.

Midway between the ends of this seam, or crevice, the sport paused and put down the wood, then knelt and closely examined the rock.

"As good as gold!" he muttered, and taking a number of cartridges from his belt, he inserted them in the crevice, bullet end downward.

That part arranged to his satisfaction, he next carefully assorted the wood and stacked it upon the butts of the cartridges, then lighted a match and fired the artfully contrived mine.

Returning to the boulders, the sport caught up his rifle, and, keeping an eye on the angle, retreated with Rosa in the direction of the cavern.

There, snugly ensconced behind a rocky projection, the two patiently waited, until ten minutes had passed away.

Then came a booming crash that seemed to shake the entire mountain side, followed by the swift rumble of descending debris.

Mutely the two fugitives gazed at each other.

"The path is destroyed!" declared Rosa, at length.

Without venturing a response, Cool Creede hastened back to the boulders.

A single glance was sufficient to remove all doubt. The explosion had split off fifteen or twenty feet of the ledge, rendering it absolutely impassable to horse or man.

"Let him follow who can," the sport exclaimed, jubilantly, and with smiling face he hastened back to his fair comrade.

"The way is blocked, sure enough!" he announced. "Let us bid farewell to Silver Sam and cut sticks for Prickly Pear Camp."

"Nothing will suit me better," assured Rosa, her smiling face expressive of intense relief. "The night is young yet. We should reach the valley by midnight, and, with no ill luck, the camp by day-break."

"We'll get through, I feel sure," Cool Creede returned.

He got out the horses, and both mounted and rode away, with Rosa in the lead.

It was a perilous trail the rancher's daughter had marked out, but the full moon lighted the way, the horses were sure-footed, and shortly before midnight the two adventurers rode out of the mountains into a narrow, heavily-timbered valley.

"Here, if common report be true, is the most perilous part of our trip," Rosa remarked, in a subdued tone, as they drew rein in the dense shadows of the valley to give the horses a breathing spell. "This is the haunt of the Deserter Chief."

"We'll trust to luck; if that fails us, lead and steel," was the grim response of the dauntless sport.

"It is fortunate that our path through the valley is a short one," continued the girl, nervously urging her pony forward again. "We simply cross, and go through Death Canyon to the opposite side of the range. Prickly Pear is ten miles due north of the canyon mouth."

"Oh, we'll do the trick all right," the sport declared, reassuringly. "The worst is over."

Then, in silence, the two rode forward, side by side, and in a few minutes entered the gloomy pass known as Death Canyon.

Once fairly between the winding, overhanging walls of the pass, the moon was of little avail, and the adventurers rode onward slowly, fearing to risk a rapid pace on that dark and unknown trail.

Nearly two hours had dragged by thus, when Cool Creede noticed that the canyon seemed to widen, forming a bowl-like basin in the very heart of the range, and his keen ears caught the sound of running water.

The moon had sunk below the crests of

the crags rising from the western summit of the basin, and a deep, impenetrable gloom hung over the trail, rendering it impossible to distinguish an object the size of a man a dozen paces distant.

The sport drew rein.

"Do you know aught of the stream ahead, Rosa?" he asked.

"Only that there is a ford," the girl replied. "I have heard Teton Tom describe the trail, and if I am not mistaken we should keep close to the northern wall of the basin."

Taking the lead, Cool Creede rode slowly onward, following the foot of the cliff until the brink of the stream was reached, then dismounted and carefully examined the flinty surface of the trail.

"It is the ford," he announced, rising. "Horses have passed—"

The sentence remained unfinished.

Out of the dense gloom behind them at that instant, sweeping along with the speed of the wind, came the Demon Horseman, the skeleton forms of horse and rider showing with startling distinctness against the inky blackness of the canyon.

And, clutched in the horrible arms of the rider was the lifeless form of an old man, his bloodless face and long gray hair and beard vividly illumined by that spectral glow.

Straight past the fugitives and into the stream swept the skeleton steed; then onward it passed, to disappear behind an abrupt bend in the pass.

Silently Rosa Lee dropped from the saddle to the ground, and her slender hands gripped the arm of the sport.

"What is it, little girl?" Cool Creede asked, gently steadying that blindly reeling form. "Scared, eh?"

Swiftly came the answer, in a voice quivering with agony.

"Oh, Creede! That was my father!"

CHAPTER XI.

OCCIDENT VERSUS ORIENT.

Prickly Pear Camp was, in appearance, a typical mining hamlet, situated near the head of a small and extremely narrow valley between two mountain ranges.

A mile above the camp were the falls of Old Hat Creek, and this stream, coursing swiftly down the valley, split the hamlet in halves, that part on the eastern bank being known as Orient, while the collection of shanties, tents, dugouts and wickiups gracing the western shore was styled Occident.

The camp had a history. Most mining camps can lay claim to the same happy or unhappy distinction, but Prickly Pear Camp outranked its rivals in this respect from the fact that its history was fraught with unusual, even extremely peculiar, features.

Occident was the older portion of the camp, and it took its name from the Occident mine. This mine, at the date at which I am writing, had been in operation nearly five years. It was owned and controlled by the Occidental Mining Company.

This company was composed of five men: Jared Prendergree, Ephraim Mullet, Ichabod Ince, Abraham Jenkins, and James McMurtree. These men were the alleged discoverers of the mine and the founders of the camp. All were from Utah, and openly and avowedly in sympathy with the Mormon hierarchy.

Prendergree and Mullet had charge of the mine. Ince looked after the company's interests at the Temple of Chance, the principal saloon and gambling-hall of the camp. Jenkins was the landlord of the Salt Lake Hotel, and McMurtree was marshal of Occident.

So much for the western portion of the camp.

About a year after the discovery of the Occident Mine there had appeared, one evening, in Occident, as the camp was then called, three strangers, hailing from "the East," presumably New York. The eldest, Duval Kingsley, was nearing three score and ten, while his companions, Duke and Basil Drumm, brothers, and nephews of the old man, were not far from thirty years of age.

These three men were well armed and well mounted, and they rode into Occident with the air of men upon business bent.

Putting up at the Salt Lake Hotel, they ate a hearty supper, then despatched a messenger in search of Jared Prendergree and his partners. The owners of the Occident were not slow in appearing; and then, at the request of Duval Kingsley, the eight men retired to a private room for consultation upon some important matter which the strangers had in hand.

But fate was against Duval Kingsley and his relatives. Ere the matter which had brought them to camp had been opened for discussion, the old man—the spokesman of the party—was seized with apoplexy and died before the morning came.

Seemingly dazed by this unlooked-for occurrence, Duke and Basil Drumm had grimly declined all offers of assistance, and at daybreak bore the body of their relative across the stream and gave it burial on the eastern shore, near the foot of the range; this done, they mounted and rode silently away.

For a few days there were wonder and speculation as to the unrevealed mission of the trio, but the incident was soon forgotten, save when called to mind for the moment by that lone grave in the shadow of the mountains.

Nearly a year had passed away, when the matter was again brought to mind, and that most forcefully, too.

The early risers of Occident were amazed one morning, on leaving their beds, to discover a camp of an even hundred well-armed men stretched along the eastern bank of Old Hat Creek, directly opposite to Occident.

Whence this force had come no man in the Mormon camp could say; but it was plain to all that they were there, that they had come during the night, and that they were making preparations to stay.

James McMurtree, the marshal, forthwith reported the facts to Jared Prendergree.

"Go and see who and what they are, and what they intend to do," ordered the mine manager, with a strangely nervous twitching of his massive face, and the marshal at once obeyed.

Upon his return McMurtree reported:

"They are a mining colony come from the East. They intend to establish a camp and to work a rich mine which they have discovered and named the Orient. They are a determined lot of fellows, all well armed, and are headed by the two men who were with the old man Kingsley the night he died in Occident."

"More I could not learn, for they are close-mouthed fellows, grim and determined as death, and they intend to stay."

Prendergree smiled grimly.

"We shall see—we shall see!" he exclaimed, with a threatening inflection in his heavy tones.

But the boast of Orient was made good. Within a week the camp buildings were completed, a marshal was elected, and work on the mine begun.

And the entrance to the Orient Mine was upon the exact spot beneath which the body of old man Kingsley was supposed to lie.

Thus the rival camps were established—the camp of Occident and the camp of Orient—but known throughout the region as Prickly Pear Camp.

While open hostility between Occident and Orient was a thing unknown, the rival camps hated each other most cordially. Prendergree had early made overtures looking to a consolidation of the two camps, but his advances had been brusquely repulsed, and he had gone back to his partners silently swearing ruin to Orient. In this vow he had been heartily joined by Mullet, Ince and the others, and a secret warfare upon the good name and good fortune of Orient was at once begun.

Yet Duke and Basil Drumm seemed ever upon their guard, and every move against them, however secretly conceived and cunningly executed, was promptly checked.

The marshal of Orient, one Bolly Dorrit, was a man of remarkable astuteness. He was an ex-member of the famous Mountain Detectives, and to him, perhaps, the constant foiling of Prendergree's plots might have been fairly attributed.

Certain it is that the veteran man-hunter seemed ever in possession of advance information regarding contemplated movements of the Occidental Mining Company against Orient, and his ready wit had never yet failed to suggest a checkmating move.

In Orient the principal hotel was known simply as the American House. As in Occident, there were a number of saloons and gambling houses, the largest of which, the Ace of Spades, was presided over by a remarkable-looking personage called Faro Dick, the White Sport.

Tall, straight, sinewy as a tiger, the gamester was one to attract attention anywhere. Yet a young man in years, with a face fresh and ruddy, and eyes of a brilliant, vivid blue-gray, his long crisply-curling hair, flowing mustaches and imperial were of silvery whiteness.

Natally dressed, after the style so generally affected by the Western sport, and armed with a ten-inch bowie and a brace of heavy, double-action revolvers, Faro Dick was a figure dashing and unique.

Almost a stranger in camp was the White Sport, and an enigma to all, with the possible exception of Dorrit and the brothers Drumm—a silent, close-mouthed man, stern and unbending, and reputed "game" to his heart's core.

On the night witnessing the destruction of the Fairfax home, the five men composing the Occidental Mining Company met by agreement at the Palace of Chance, and after a drink or two at the bar repaired to the private room of Ichabod Ince at the rear of the gambling hell.

Leaving the door open, the five men carelessly seated themselves around a table and began a game of poker. For more than an hour the game ran smoothly on, and then Prendergree, who sat facing the open door, shifted uneasily in his seat, and, with a scowl on his heavy face, looked at Ince, saying:

"It is time Dupont was reporting, Ick. What the deuce has become of him?"

"Who can say?" the gambler returned, with a swift upturning of his deep-set black eyes. "It may be the tiger across the water has dropped to his game and called in his chips for all time?"

"It's never that," McMurtree muttered. "Dupont is too deuced sly to be caught napping. And at the worst, I for one don't believe Faro Dick has the sand to shoot unless crowded to the wall."

Prendergree shook his head in doubt.

"He's a riddle, that fellow is," he observed, sinking his heavy voice yet lower and furtively watching the open door. "I wish the whole deal were over with. Tomorrow night is but the beginning of the end, and yet I feel that it will end the trail for some of us. It is well indeed that the Prince has sworn us by the sacred token, or I, for one, would—"

"Would—what?" Ince sharply asked, as Prendergree abruptly checked himself.

"Would be content with our profits as they are," the Occidental manager replied, his small gray eyes kindling savagely. "And we'd do well at that."

"Oh, yes," and the gambler's even, white teeth showed in an odd little smile. "But we must pay for the protection we've had and will have from the Prince's cohort. Orient is a standing menace to Occident, and must be wiped out. You admit that?"

"I admit that," grimly. "Five necks have been in danger from the time the Drumms reappeared."

"An' that's no great, big lie!" hastily spluttered Abraham Jenkins, the rotund landlord of the Salt Lake Hotel, for the first time entering into the discussion. "We'd orter gone after those fellows hot-foot on their fu'st show-up."

"There's time aplenty for you to work that trick yet, Ab," Ince remarked, dryly. "But, seriously, lads, I think we are borrowing a great deal of unnecessary trouble. There will be no war in Orient

to-morrow night, and we shall simply line our pockets and have that much to the good when the smash-up does come. The Prince ever remembers his friends, and he has dealt us a good hand."

"That is it, exactly," nodded McMurtree. "And if we succeed in capturing the bank-roll over there it will weaken Orient just that much."

"And, here is Dupont," Prendergree exclaimed, with a sharply-drawn breath of relief, as a slenderly-built, oldish-looking man suddenly glided into the room.

"Yes, here is Dupont," the new-comer responded, a wolfish grin parting his thin lips as he closed the door. "I worked the trick, too, and switched the boxes and the packs. The White Sport will be deeper than the sea if he detects the difference before it is too late."

And forth from his pocket the fellow drew a silver dealing-box and a dozen packs of cards and placed them in a heap upon the table.

"I compared them closely, and they match so exactly they would fool the man who made them," he continued. "Faro Dick will sit in luck, indeed, if he detects the difference."

"But take my advice and make your play late to-morrow night—the later the better."

CHAPTER XII.

THE WHITE SPORT.

The patrons of the Ace of Spades could certainly have no cause for complaint at the appointments of the place.

Adjoining the American House on the north, the gambling-hall was connected with the bar-room and dining-room of the latter by means of curtained archways, and the service of both was ever free to the players when hungry or thirsty.

In itself, the gambling hall occupied a room probably thirty by eighty feet. The rough board walls were hidden behind curtains of heavy chintz, while six or eight feet from the swinging doors in front was a huge screen, fashioned to represent the ace of spades.

The large room was well lighted by means of numerous oil lamps suspended from the ceiling, while at regular intervals along the walls were pictures of noteworthy sporting events and celebrities.

The forward half of the room was filled with card-tables and various gaming devices, while across the rear of the apartment was a raised platform two feet in height, devoted to the faro tables and roulette wheels.

The Ace of Spades was almost exclusively an all-night resort, rarely if ever opening during the day, and the limit was fixed only by the purse of the bettor.

Shortly after two o'clock on the night following that peculiar conference which had taken place among the members of the Occidental Mining Company, in the rear room of the Palace of Chance, Jared Prendergree and Ichabod Ince suddenly entered the Ace of Spades through the archway leading to the bar-room of the American House.

Straight as a bee flies, the gambler in the lead, they made their way to the raised platform, ascended the steps and paused in front of the faro layout.

At that hour there were probably thirty men in the room, some engaged in play, others watching the players; but one and all looked up on the appearance of the men from Occident, and a momentary hush fell upon the room.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," suavely saluted the White Sport, nodding slightly, while his vivid, blue-gray eyes for the moment fairly met the gaze of the two men.

"Is it business or pleasure?"

"Both," tersely replied Ince, dropping into a chair squarely facing Faro Dick, and placing a roll of bills upon the table.

"Checks, please."

"How much?"

"Five thousand."

With a scarcely perceptible lifting of his white brows, Faro Dick dropped the roll into his money drawer and set forth a stack of red checks.

"Same here," uttered Prendergree, with

a slight cough as he likewise placed a roll of bills upon the layout.

Again that slight lifting of his brows, the deft motion of his hands, and the White Sport settled back in his seat, ready for business.

Slipping the pack from the box, he shuffled it thoroughly, then placed it upon the layout. Ince cut the cards, and the White Sport slipped them into the box, exposing the ace of spades as the top, or soda, card.

"Make your bets, gentlemen; the game is ready," he exclaimed, a peculiar intonation marring his usual monotone.

Each man put down a single check. On the second turn Ince lost and Prendergree won. Then came three turns in which no action was had, but on the fourth turn a close observer would have noticed that Ince started slightly, while an exultant gleam flashed across his usually impassive face.

A singular thing had happened.

Upon the smooth and highly polished end of the dealing-box next to the gambler there had suddenly appeared a small black speck, visible only to one seated exactly opposite it.

It was the signal the plotters had been awaiting, and was produced by a card a trifle longer than its fellows pressing against a bit of delicate mechanism in the end of the box, immediately beneath the card exposed to view.

This long card must, therefore, be the losing, or banker's card, on the next turn.

And as both Prendergree and Ince knew that the sixes, sevens and eights were the long cards in the pack, they knew how and where to place their money to win.

"I'll try the 'pot' this time, for the limit," Ince remarked, after a moment's deliberation, with an inquiring glance at the White Sport.

"Name it," was the cool retort.

With a slight flush at that half-insolent rebuff, the gambler shoved his nineteen checks, with a copper upon them, into the "pot," or space surrounded on three sides by the six, seven and eight.

"That's a good bluff if you lose," ejaculated Prendergree, visibly excited. "I'll go with you."

Faro Dick smiled grimly.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Ready."

The supple white fingers of the sport slipped the exposed card aside, revealing the seven of diamonds.

Involuntarily Prendergree half rose from his chair.

"Steady, gentlemen!" warned the White Sport, coldly. "There's one card to show yet!"

Then the seven of diamonds fell beside the box and the seven of spades lay revealed.

"Curses! A split!" Ince exclaimed, clenching his hands, while Prendergree settled back into his chair with an expression of dismay upon his heavy face.

"Yes, gentlemen, a split," Faro Dick returned, calmly, as he took down half of the checks in the pot. "It is one of the fortunes of war."

Mechanically the baffled plotters drew down the remaining checks, and bet them here and there upon the board until that tell-tale spot again appeared upon the end of the dealing-box.

Reduced now to less than a thousand dollars each, both men bought again and placed all their checks in the pot.

Again the turn brought forth a split, the six of diamonds showing, followed by the six of spades.

Furious, now that his skillfully arranged plot had been turned against him, Ichabod Ince leaped to his feet, weapons in hand, only to find a cocked revolver staring him straight in the face!

"Go easy, my dear fellow!" icily enunciated the White Sport, his gray-blue eyes gleaming wickedly. "Remember, this is only an instance of where the best laid plans of mice and men oft gang aglee!"

"It is a brace game!" growled Prendergree, likewise helpless under the muzzle of a leveled "six."

"The cards were stacked against us!" Ince declared, furiously.

"And they were dealt from your box, gentlemen, you ought not to complain," blandly retorted the White Sport. "Give Skinny Dupont my compliments, and say to him there is a warm reception awaiting him on his reappearance in Orient."

Utterly crestfallen, the two men stood silent and helpless, while the denizens of the Ace of Spades, aroused to the fact that there was "something going on," crowded forward and ascended the platform.

But at that juncture there came a startling interruption.

CHAPTER XIII.

FARO DICK SHOWS HIS TEETH.

A burst of yells arose from the street, followed by the swift cracking of a revolver, and a man backed quickly through the open doorway of the Ace of Spades, knocking over the huge screen in his haste.

His right hand clutched a smoking weapon, while his left arm supported the form of a fainting girl.

One swift glance at that startling scene, then the White Sport cleared the faro table at a bound and sped forward to the assistance of the unknown, his revolvers ringing out sharply at the crowd of masked men now surging through the open door.

Then, at a signal from Faro Dick, the adherents of the Ace of Spades rallied swiftly, a number springing to his support, while others hurriedly emptied the contents of the money drawers into canvas bags and disappeared into the hotel.

In less than a minute had these rapid changes in the scene occurred, and then Ince and Prendergree found themselves alone upon the platform, silent witnesses of that bitter struggle raging in the forward end of the room.

Unflinchingly the White Sport and his followers held the ground between the fugitive and his pursuers, until the former had gained the curtained archway leading to the hotel dining room with his fair, burden reclining helplessly upon his left arm, there to pause for a single breath in indecision.

And in that fleeting instant the keen black eyes of Ince swept the face of each, and he started sharply, grasping Prendergree's arm with nervous haste.

"By Heavens! it is Cool Creede!" he ejaculated, in a sybilant whisper. "And—yes! It is the girl—Rosa Lee!"

"Quick, man! Out with the lights! The Prince's plot has miscarried, and if we do not act the game is lost!"

Winning under that fierce grip upon his arm, Jared Prendergree shrank back for an instant; then, as Ince leaped from the platform to the floor, the mine manager deftly drew back a pace, a leveled revolver in each hand, to send forth shot after shot, until the Ace of Spades was in total darkness!

Then came the sounds of a short, sharp struggle at the curtained archway, followed by a heavy fall, and Prendergree hurriedly dropped at full length behind the faro table, out of range of the leaden ball flying so thick and fast in that ill-starred place.

Thus a moment had passed, when, suddenly from the front, there rose a shrill rallying cry, to be answered by shouts from within and without, and in less than the time it takes to tell it, the invaders departed and the struggle was ended.

"Quick, boys! the lights!" rang out the stern voice of the White Sport, and as a tiny burst of flame appeared here and there in that silently shifting throng, his tall form could be descried striding rapidly toward the curtained archway.

With a bitter imprecation hissing through his strong, firmly-clinched teeth, Prendergree swiftly raised a freshly-charged revolver and fired twice point-blank at the Sport, when, with a lightness of foot and a speed hardly credible in one of his massive proportions and advanced age, he sprang from behind the faro table, darted to the end of the platform, and dropped silently to the floor, to mingle with the crowd a moment later when the lights flared up.

To luck, and luck alone, the White Sport owed escape from death or injury

at the hands of the mine manager, for at the very moment preceding the delivery of those furious snap-shots, his foot struck the body of Cool Creede lying just within the archway, and sent him in a sprawling heap upon the floor.

Stunned by that fall, Faro Dick lay silent and motionless until recalled to his senses by a sudden writhing and wriggling on the part of the man lying partially beneath him, and then both suddenly rose to their feet, face to face in the semi-gloom of the archway.

"You devil! What have you done with her?" fiercely demanded Cool Creede, drawing a hand swiftly across his eyes to clear away the bloody mist blurring his vision. "Speak, or out goes your light!"

"Easy, Creede! I am a friend, not a foe!" the White Sport returned, lifting his empty hands into view, as a ray of light from a freshly lighted lamp penetrated the gloom of the recess. "And we'll find the girl, never fear, if we have to rake Occident from dome to pit!"

"You saw, then—"

"I saw the man who got her—no more, no less, Creede, pard," was the swift interruption, while the strong, white hand of Faro Dick closed kindly yet firmly upon the arm of the stranger sport. "Quick, man! Get the blur out of your eyes and come with me, for every minute is precious right now!"

Mechanically, it seemed, Cool Creede steadied himself a moment, then again lightly brushed his eyes, wiping away the blood trickling from a slight cut above his brow.

"Point the path, pardner," he exclaimed, warmly grasping the hand of the White Sport. "I know you now; in the dark I didn't."

"This way, then, and guard the rear when I nab the culprit," Faro Dick responded, heartily returning that warm hand-clasp. "I got a sight—that was all; but if I've hit the game off right we'll find our man right in the push."

Silently the two stepped out into the gambling-room, and the White Sport scanned the crowd until he had singled out Ichabod Ince and Jared Prendergree.

"They're here, fast enough—all two of 'em!" he muttered, grimly, his brilliant blue-gray eyes flashing vividly. "Come, Creede, but look out for the big fellow."

Straight through the crowd, now rapidly increasing, strode Faro Dick, until he stood before Ichabod Ince.

Too late the Occident gambler divined the White Sport's purpose, for even as his hands dropped swiftly to the weapons in his girdle, a revolver swung to a level with his face, and over its polished length came the stern and threatening command: "Hands up! Ichabod Ince!"

"Move but a muscle, and I'll send your worthless soul to meet its Maker!"

Following the clear and ringing voice of the White Sport, and the compliance with his demand, came a hush deep and breathless, fraught with intense expectancy. Then Jared Prendergree moved uneasily, and shifted the weight of his ponderous body from one leg to the other.

"I must say, Faro Dick, that your methods smack strongly of Captain Slyboots!" he exclaimed, clearing his throat and speaking with an effort. "If our little contribution—"

"Enough said!" curtly interrupted the White Sport. "I am dealing business to you now, and business only goes."

"Ince, what have you done with the lady you carried from this room a few minutes ago?"

The Occident gambler started, and his face grew white.

"I carried no lady—"

"Liar!"

Hotly, swiftly came that interruption, and, lowering his revolver, the White Sport deftly returned it to the holster in his girdle. Then his open right hand shot out, falling stinging across the lips of Ichabod Ince.

A sharp gasp of surprise went up from the crowd, and it abruptly parted to the right and to the left, leaving the way clear for that which must surely follow—a duel to the death!

CHAPTER XIV.

TURNING THE TABLES.

"Fool critter! He jes' done c'u'dn't take the boss's advice, but hed ter come totin' 'long after the band wagon, an' thet's why I'm laid up fer repairs, while he's crooked up like a sore dog's back under a passel o' fleas! Now, ye heur me, Red Mike, an' don't ye go fer to givin' me any sermon, fer when he comes 'round I'm goin' fer ter ingineer the job so's ter take some o' ther hurt out o' this hole in my shoulder. Say I kin, now, cap, an' I'll lay et out so plain—"

"Drop your gab, Arkansaw," was the impatient interruption. "You're only creased, at the worst. Lay hold an' help bring the laddy-buck to, for it was an ugly tumble he got from the saddle."

"His neck ain't broke—wuss luck!"

"And it's good that it isn't. The chief's orders were not to kill him, but to lay him by the heels and shunt him through to Prickly Pear Camp. Only, if he'd taken good advice he'd saved us a heap o' trouble!"

Like one dead lay Jasper Fairfax, his white face upturned to the rays of the moon, just where he had fallen when dragged from the saddle by that skillfully-thrown lariat; yet, not dead, nor even wholly unconscious, for the words of the two men bending over him came to his ears in a sort of confused jumble, out of which at times he was able to catch a sentence in its entirety.

Then his chin was abruptly forced down and the neck of a bottle thrust into his mouth. A spoonful, perhaps, of hot and villainous liquor trickled down his throat, and he half rose, convulsed with a severe spasm of coughing and strangling.

"Stiddy, critter!" warned Red Mike, viciously, gripping the shoulders of his victim and forcing him back to a sitting posture. "We're onto all sech wrinkles as thet 'ar, honey, an' it don't go!"

"The rope, Arkansaw—truss his arms, quick! Fer he's a fiend to hold, an' no mistake!"

Deftly, his brutal face aglow with vicious satisfaction, the second outlaw grasped the wrists of the struggling man, drawing around them the end of a lariat, which he hastened to tie securely.

Further resistance, just then, was beyond the strength of Jasper Fairfax, and he submitted with the best grace possible.

"Thar' ye be, honey—snug as a bug in a rug!" Red Mike chuckled, releasing his grip on the captive as Arkansaw stepped back a pace and gave the lariat a savage jerk. "Not a weenty bit o' room fer kick-in', an' ye'll go ter Prickly Pear meek as mutton!"

"Oh, yes; I suppose I'm booked for a through trip," Fairfax returned, coolly.

"An' lucky at that," assured Arkansaw, with a grimace, as a sudden twinge of pain reminded him of the wound in his shoulder. "Left to my say, sport, ther klotes would pick ye'r bones right hyar."

"Drop ye'r chinnin' an' bring up ther critters," ordered Red Mike, sharply, as he took the lariat from Arkansaw's hand. "Time aplenty fer gab when business is done."

Scowling savagely, Arkansaw hurried into the timber, whence he reappeared a moment later, leading two horses.

"Call up ye'r critter!" Red Mike again ordered, addressing the captive.

Fairfax at once obeyed, and, a moment later, was lifted bodily from the ground and seated in his saddle, where he was firmly bound.

Then the two outlaws mounted, and Red Mike made fast to his saddle-horn the end of the lariat binding Fairfax.

"Take the lead, Arkansaw," the outlaw continued, as he rode alongside the captive. "Head straight for Death Canyon." Arkansaw started.

"It's a bad way for us, cap—"

"Take the lead," was the peremptory interruption. "Do as I tell you!"

The alert wits of Jasper Fairfax were not idle, and he was quick to note that sudden lapse in Red Mike's mode of speech.

"The chief himself in disguise," was the thought which instantly suggested itself,

and the captive began a close and systematic, though covert, scrutiny of the outlaw.

A tall, well-built fellow, as nearly as could be judged, and one sitting the saddle with the easy grace of a perfect horseman, was Red Mike. His garb was suggestive of the mines, in that it consisted simply of high-topped boots, pants of some rough, dark material, blue flannel shirt and a black slouched hat. A leather belt encircled his middle, supporting a knife and a brace of heavy revolvers, while at his back hung a repeating rifle.

Then the brilliant moonlight disclosed a strong, clearly-cut face, the lower portion of which was covered by a full beard, of a bright, foxy-red color, while the hair clustering about his ears and neck seemed just a shade darker.

His eyes, seemingly as black as darkest night, were large and full, and swept the broken plain ahead with quick, restless glances.

"Not one of the ordinary, in any event," mused Fairfax, as he concluded that brief but thorough survey. "Let me see you walk once, my gallant robber chief, and I'll single you out among ten thousand!"

"Come; let us set forward!" exclaimed Red Mike, at that juncture, bending upon the captive a peculiar look, as if fully conscious of that silent scrutiny and its attendant mental notes. "Arkansaw has cut out our trail, and we must ride hard to gain Prickly Pear Camp before break of day."

"You may spare yourself the trouble," Fairfax coldly returned.

"Not so, my man," was the sharp retort. "It is dollars against cents I know my own business best. Orders are to drive you into Prickly Pear, and so to the camp you go."

"Orders—from whom?"

"The chief."

"Prince Mars?"

"Perhaps; but drop your questions. All it is necessary for you to know I shall tell—for the rest, let it remain a sealed book."

Red Mike spoke curtly, and urged the horses forward, following Arkansaw at a distance of a hundred yards, while Fairfax remained silent.

In the distance lay the smoking ruins of Sunset Ranch, but the course marked out by the outlaw ran off to the westward, thence it bent abruptly to the north, following the foot of the mountain, so that no near approach to the burning buildings was made.

CHAPTER XV.

HEMMED IN.

For nearly an hour the trio rode onward without the exchange of a word; then, as they swept around a sharp bend in the range, the sound of rapid firing came down from the hills, and Arkansaw came to a halt.

"What you make o' that, cap?" he asked, as Red Mike spurred up and drew rein.

"Some one from the ranch driven at bay by the Shoshone," was the ready response.

"But, jest who, cap, ef not ther sport an' ther gal?"

Red Mike started violently, and an execration came from between his clinched teeth.

"Ther cowboys were cleaned up fu'st off," pursued Arkansaw, nonchalantly. "No one escaped from the ranch—we know thet."

"True."

"An' ther Sport an' ther gal war' missed, an' et war' left fer them ter run inter Silver Sam's net."

"Yes, yes! That must be it!" Red Mike assented, visibly excited. "And the sport has detected the trap and run the girl off into the hills."

"Jes'so, cap; an' now he's made a stand at the point o' rocks. An' ef he knows his business he'll stand Silver Sam off, go down ther range, cross ther valley, an' slip through Death Canyon ter Prickly Pear."

Again Red Mike started, and a malignant look crept into his face.

"My Heavens! Arkansaw, I believe you have hit upon the exact truth!" he

averred. "Such being the case, I will ride at once to headquarters and put a good force into Death Canyon, to shut off escape in that direction.

"Take Fairfax, and push for Prickly Pear Camp by the upper trail. Crowd the animals hard, to finish the trip before day, and be careful to get start enough to keep out of harm's way on the back track."

"Trust me fer thet," chuckled Arkansaw, averting his face to conceal a look of almost fiendish exultation as he grasped the lariat confining Fairfax. "I'll land him safe and sound in Prickly Pear, never you fear!"

That point settled, Red Mike looked to his weapons and struck off at a gallop, leaving Arkansaw and the captive following at a slower pace, and soon disappeared behind a spur in the range.

"Now, critter, prepare ye'rself fer business!" gritted Arkansaw, suddenly leaning over and dealing the captive a sharp blow in the face with his clinched hand. "Dun' reckon we'll wipe out old scores right hyar!"

Reeling in the saddle from the force of that brutal blow, Jasper Fairfax fell forward upon the neck of his horse, to all appearances senseless; but, unseen by Arkansaw, one hand was free, and that hand promptly grasped the butt of a revolver protruding from the saddle holster!

With a sniff of disgust the outlaw urged his horse closer to that of the captive, and roughly grasped him by the shoulder to jerk him upright in the saddle.

Then the unexpected happened.

Fairfax's arm shot outward, and the butt of the heavy revolver fell with terrific force full upon the head of the luckless Arkansaw, knocking him out of the saddle to the ground, an inert, senseless heap.

Swiftly Fairfax replaced the revolver in the holster and grasped the knife in his belt. A deft slash or two, and the lariat holding his feet parted, and he dropped nimbly to the ground.

Grim and determined, his eyes glowing with a baleful light, Fairfax sprang to the outlaw's side, and with a few skillful turns of the severed lariat, made his hands fast at his back, then lashed his arms firmly against his sides.

That done, he appropriated the rascal's belt of arms, then jerked open the collar of his blue flannel shirt.

But no tell-tale token met his gaze.

"I do not understand it," Fairfax muttered. "The severed head meant something, yet this fellow, belonging to the same desperate clan, is innocent of any betraying sign.

"Ah, well, the truth will out, sooner or later, and as a step to that end I'll carry this ruffian along and force a confession from him."

To think was to act, and with scarcely a perceptible effort Fairfax lifted the unconscious ruffian in his short, but powerful arms, placed him in the saddle, and tied his feet firmly together, then mounted and spurred onward, leading the horse of his captive.

Mile after mile fell behind the avenger and his captive, and just at midnight both rode out upon a rough trail leading through a gap in the range direct to Prickly Pear Camp, fifteen miles away.

Halting beside a small stream within the shadows of the hills, Fairfax dismounted to water the horses and look after his captive, who had as yet given no sign of returning consciousness.

"A hard jolt, but no more than he deserved," Fairfax grimly muttered, as he ran his fingers lightly over the ugly contusion on Arkansaw's forehead. "Ah, there's his pocket flask. I'll give him a dose of his own medicine and a dash of cold water."

Suiting his action to the word, Fairfax forced the neck of the flask into the outlaw's mouth, and allowed a liberal dose of the fiery whisky to trickle down his throat.

That of itself seemed sufficient, for a violent tremor shook the half-rigid form, and Arkansaw opened his eyes and glared savagely around.

"What the deuce—"

A hatful of water descending over his

head and face cut short the rest of that fervid question, ending it with a gurgle and a splutter expressive of intense disgust.

"Easy, old pard," mockingly uttered Fairfax, vaulting into the saddle and again urging the horses onward. "Save your breath. You'll have time aplenty for talk by and by, as your cut-throat chief said."

"But what—"

"The tables have turned, that is all."

"Yas, I reckon," dolefully. "An' ye'r pards—whar' are they?"

Fairfax laughed grimly, and replied:

"In Prickly Pear Camp, I believe. They were there last week."

A look of incredulity came upon the ruffian's face.

"An' ye did this hyar leetle trick alone?" he demanded.

"Certainly."

"An' I let ye do et?"

"Assuredly."

Arkansaw reflected a moment, then a grunt of disgust came from between his bearded lips.

"Reckon I'm a chump," he admitted at length. "'Stead o' me wipin' out thet old score betwixt us, you're fixed to do thet trick—deuce brile ye!"

"And I intend to do it," assured Fairfax, sternly. "Not only the old score, but the new one. Up near the falls is a snug nook I know, and we'll go into camp there till morning. After that—business with you!"

Something in the tones of the rancher shook the iron nerve of the desperado, and he shivered perceptibly.

Then silence fell between the two, unbroken save by the steady beat of the horses' hoofs on the trail.

An hour before dawn Fairfax quitted the trail, turning into a narrow defile leading away to the north, and twenty minutes later drew rein in a cavernous pocket.

"Here we are," he announced, dismounting and severing the thongs holding the feet of his captive.

Then a piercing whistle awoke the echoes, and out of the dense blackness of the pocket swept a dozen shadowy forms, hemming in captive and captor!

CHAPTER XVI.

CONFUSION IN THE CAMP.

Uttering a howl of delight, Arkansaw sank forward upon the neck of his horse, anxious to expose himself as little as possible to the bullets of these men, whom he felt to be friends.

"Hands up, gentlemen, and give an account of yourselves!" ordered a stern voice, as the leader of that shadowy band stepped forward.

"A friend, if you are honest men!" was Fairfax's fearless response, as he stood at bay with a revolver in each hand. "My name is Fairfax, and I stopped here with an outlaw prisoner, to go into camp."

"Fairfax, you say?" cried the leader, quickly. "Jasper Fairfax, the rancher?"

"The same, sir."

A mellow laugh came from the unknown, and he lowered his pistol hand.

"Well met!" he exclaimed. "We are the pards of Cool Creede, in camp awaiting his arrival.

"Come forward, Mr. Fairfax, and make yourself comfortable with us.

"Boys, make sure of the prisoner there, and see that he has no chance of escape."

Then Arkansaw's feeling of relief gave way to black despair. Strong hands lifted him out of the saddle, and in another minute he was being hurried away through the darkness.

"You are about the last man we were looking for at this hour, Mr. Fairfax," continued the leader of the party, as he walked along with the young rancher. "But you are, nevertheless, most welcome, for we all know of you, through Cool Creede.

"My name is Deerfoot. The boys and myself all belong on the upper ranges, but came with Creede to lend the ranchers an' miners a helping hand in the coming trouble."

"And I am heartily glad you are here,"

returned Fairfax, warmly. "But you speak of Creede as absent. Has he—"

"We broke company the other side of the range this afternoon, he to ride down to your place, while we came on to our appointed rendezvous," Deerfoot explained. "And that, Mr. Fairfax, is the reason we're surprised to see you at this hour, for Creede was to return with you to-morrow night."

"That was the arrangement we had made," the rancher explained; "but the movements of the outlaws have forced a change of plans, for the raid is now on," and Fairfax tersely narrated, in outline, the tragic events of the preceding day and night.

"Then Creede is at bay in the hills, or, at best, in danger of ambush in Death Canyon!" exclaimed Deerfoot, after a moment's reflection. "For, of course, the sport this Red Mike referred to could have been no other than Creede."

"Yes, Creede; and the girl must certainly be the daughter of Major Benson Lee, of Sunset Ranch," Fairfax declared.

"But I am not disposed to take a gloomy view of the situation, so far as they are concerned, for the major's daughter is so thoroughly familiar with the range that she can easily keep both out of harm's way.

"Then, too, Death Canyon is the favorite haunt of the Demon Horseman and his allies, so that it will be almost impossible for the outlaws to plant an ambush there."

Deerfoot started, and in the gray gloom of the coming day looked sharply at the rancher.

"You mean by that—"

"I mean, simply, that I have strong reasons for believing the hobgoblin friendly to the ranchers and miners," was the smiling interruption. "In any event, I am assured that he has never harmed an honest man, while many of the deeds attributed to him might better have been placed to the credit of the outlaws, red and white."

"I am, indeed, glad to hear you say that," Deerfoot declared, with a breath of relief. "The ranges and camps hereabouts seem so thoroughly infested with law-breakers that it is a relief to know that the mysterious rider is not to be numbered as one of them.

"But here we are, and I again bid you welcome."

The party had now reached the temporary camp. A fire was burning brightly in a secluded spot among the rocks, and Fairfax noted with pleasurable satisfaction that two of the men were busied with preparations for breakfast.

Introducing the rancher to the men, Deerfoot turned away to see personally to the safety of the captive.

Then the sentries stationed at various points in the pass were relieved, and just as day broke the whole crew sat down to the rude but bountiful breakfast awaiting them, Arkansaw among the number.

From time to time the outlaw covertly scanned the faces around him, but if there was aught there of an encouraging nature he failed to detect it.

Rough and bearded they were with the single exception of the leader, Deerfoot; yet the glances he encountered were cold and forbidding, and he readily surmised that he and his ilk were in decidedly bad odor among such men.

CHAPTER XVII.

FORCING A SECRET.

As soon as the meal was finished, Fairfax and the chief drew aside for a brief consultation. When that had ended, by order of Deerfoot, Arkansaw was carried into a deeper recess of the pocket, and bound firmly to a boulder.

"Now, boys, some wood, and a few brands from the camp fire," requested the chief, as he seated himself beside Fairfax, opposite to the prisoner.

Arkansaw paled visibly.

"What de ye mean ter do, cap?" he queried, in the steadiest tone he could command. "Kill me?"

"By inches!" was the fiercely uttered response. "You must die as you have

lived. You have known what border vengeance is; you have courted that vengeance for years, and now you shall receive it!"

"Not much, hossfly!" retorted the outlaw, with a desperate assumption of bravado. "You've got the wrong critter, I reckon."

"Oh, no; we have made no mistake!" Fairfax declared, speaking for the first time. "It has been known to us for a long time that you were associated with the Deserter Chief and Prince Mars. You whole record is against you."

"Then, too, you were taken red-handed last night, flushed with the fiendish work of the past four-and-twenty hours, and you should not grumble, now that you are called to account."

At that juncture the men reappeared, each bearing an armful of wood, which was carefully stacked in a half-circle around the outlaw. Then a half dozen firebrands were thrust into the pile, and as the smoke curled lazily upward Deerfoot motioned to his men to withdraw.

Arkansaw hung limp and helpless in his bonds, his face a dull, yellowish white. In the face of the frightful fate awaiting him, his oft-boasted nerve had given way.

"Have mercy!" he pleaded. "Give me a chance for life, an' I will—will—"

"Will—what?" demanded Fairfax, coldly.

"Tell all I know."

"Of Prince Mars and his plots?"

"Yas."

"Of the whereabouts of my sister?"

"Yas, yas—everything."

Deerfoot smiled grimly, and slowly shook his head.

"I am afraid you are too late, Arkansaw," he averred, his dark brows contracting in an ominous frown. "Suppose I should tell you all those things have been made known to us?"

"Oh, Lawd! I reckon I'm a goner, then!" was the disconsolate response.

"Unless—suppose, chief, we give him a chance," suggested Fairfax. "Let him tell what he knows, and if it agrees with the reports of your secret agents, spare him for trial."

"He is your prisoner," returned Deerfoot, coldly. "At best, he deserves to die; but do as you will."

"I will tell ther truth!" declared Arkansaw, earnestly, a faint flush of hope partially dispelling the pallor of his face, while his eyes remained fixed upon the gradually spreading flames. "Give me a square deal—that's all I ask."

"Very good—you'll get that," the rancher returned. "Now, where is my sister?"

"At headquarters, near Prickly Pear Camp," was the tremulous reply.

"Near the camp, you say?"

"Yas, in this hyer identical range, but jest whar' I don't know."

"You have been there?"

"Once, but with blinkers on. No one but ther League Queen, Prince Mars an' ther six captains knows ther place."

"The headquarters are said to be in the Uintah Mountains," interposed Deerfoot.

"All a bluff, boss, ter hide ther real thing," Arkansaw hastened to declare.

"Prince Mars is an actuality—you have seen him?" pursued Fairfax.

"Yas, once—a big fellow, humpbacked an' ugly es 'riginal sin—ther devil himself, barrin' hoof, horns an' tail."

"And the Queen?"

"Ther Prince's mother—old es ther hills an' ugly ter boot. She handles ther treasure; ther Prince orders ther men."

"What force have they?"

Arkansaw shook his head doubtfully.

"I rally don't know, pardner," he returned, after a moment's reflection.

"Thar's six companies—the Deserter's. Silver Sam's, two secret gangs in—"

The outlaw ended with a sharp gasp. A tremor ran through his form, and his head sank limply upon his breast.

At the same instant, the heavy detonation of a rifle stung heavily through the morning air. Far up on the eastern wall of the basin a puff of grayish-white smoke, rising from a small cluster of bushes on the edge of a terrace, marked

the position of the author of that cowardly shot.

In a breath all was confusion in the camp.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FARO DICK EXPLAINS.

That Gambler Ince was a man of nerve no one in Prickly Pear had ever doubted, and now that he had been publicly insulted so grossly all expected him to draw his weapons and settle the affair then and there.

But this course was the last one Ince wished to take, just then; and it was with a breath of secret relief that he hailed the next scene in that startling drama.

Out of the ranks of the crowd, coming from just where no one could say, lunged a short, bulky fellow of powerful build, red haired and red bearded, a heavy revolver in each hand, to take his stand directly between the two men.

This man was Bolly Dorritt, marshal of Orient.

"Stiddy, critters!" he warned, emphasizing his words with a flourish of his weapons. "I hates ter spile yer fun, but this hyar leetle circus hes gone jest far enough—fer ther present!"

"Kill each other ef ye must, but do it like gentlemen."

"Your stand is well taken, marshal," Prendergree exclaimed, in a dignified way as he stepped forward. "Of course, the insult offered my friend Ince must be avenged, and I shall be glad to act as his representative, at the proper time and place."

The gambler bowed his thanks.

Smiling sardonically, the White Sport turned to Cool Creede. Their eyes met, and then the man in buckskin advanced to meet Prendergree, saying, simply:

"I shall await your pleasure at the American Hotel."

The mine manager nodded stiffly, then turned and with Ince quitted the gambling-hall. Crossing the footbridge over Old Hat Creek, the two proceeded directly to the Temple of Chance.

Here they found Eph Mullet, Landlord Jenkins and Marshal McMurtree anxiously awaiting them.

Through spies the ill-favored trio had learned of the miscarriage of the skillfully-laid plot to rob the Ace of Spades.

"Well, well! It turned out a regular surprise party," McMurtree exclaimed, as the pair entered the room and dropped sullenly into seats at the table. "It couldn't have been worse!"

"Curse it, no!" Prendergree returned, a dark scowl crossing his heavy face. "Everything seems to have gone wrong, all at once!"

"No, it's hardly as bad as that," assured Ince. "While we lost our money, we got the girl."

"And the cash will come back to us on the final clean-up," McMurtree added. "The worst of it is, we've been led into exposing our hands."

At which all shook their heads dubiously, and each man helped himself to a drink.

"Well, I for one don't like the present outlook," declared Ince, after a moment's silence. "It begins to strike me that in this duel I have an extremely risky job on hand."

"This Faro Dick is an entirely different man from what I had suspected him to be, and I am firmly convinced that unless I succeed in double banking him I'll get the worse of it in our little affair."

"That is indeed a wise remark," Prendergree exclaimed, with a knowing shake of his head. "The same idea has been weighing upon me, and I've figured it out that if you go ahead with the thing, on the square, the chances are about five to one that you will come out at the little end of the horn."

"The man is a fighter, quick as flash lightning, and with nerves of steel."

"Yes, yes! You must double-bank him, or your part of the game is as good as lost!"

In silence all drank again. Then, after

a moment's thought, Ince put down his glass and spoke, saying:

"I have a plan, and I think the trick you suggest can be worked."

Prendergree nodded approvingly.

"Go ahead and make all arrangements for the duel," the gambler continued. "Have the time fixed for midnight, if possible, as the full moon will be at its brightest about that hour, and it will give all the boys a chance to see the fun. You understand?"

"Oh, yes; I am to play to give all parties the squarest kind of a deal," and Prendergree chuckled violently.

"That is the very idea. You can make the plea that I have been compelled to leave camp to-day on an important business matter, so that, anxious as I am for a meeting, it will be impossible for me to fight before midnight or thereabouts."

At that point the voices of the plotters sank to a whisper, and the villainous scheme of Ichabod Ince was discussed in detail.

A few minutes later Landlord Jenkins withdrew from the conference and hastened to the hotel stables, where he saddled and bridled the gambler's horse.

Gambler Ince at once appeared, fully armed. Mounting, he forded the stream into Orient, laid his course to the northward, struck spurs to his horse and galloped away.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WHITE SPORT EXPLAINS.

With the departure of the baffled Occidentals, the excitement quickly subsided at the Ace of Spades.

The crowd of miners attracted by the sounds of that short, sharp conflict at once dispersed and returned to their beds. The wounded were carried into the hotel and made comfortable, and the gambling-hall was locked up and the lights extinguished.

Then the White Sport, arm in arm with Cool Creede, sought his sleeping apartment, where they were speedily joined by Dorritt, the marshal.

"You can rest easy, boys," the latter assured, as he entered the chamber and threw the door wide open. "Everything is working right, and we shall be able, not only to locate the girl, but to discount any move the enemy may make."

"As the case stands, they will be compelled to show their hands before many hours—the very point we have been aiming at for weeks past."

"You see, Mr. Cool," he continued, turning and directly addressing the sport, "you see, sir, that affairs are in a very complex, not to say puzzling, state in this camp just now. We have been very nearly in the predicament of the man who stood between the devil and the deep sea; but there seems to be a ray of light coming out of the darkness now, and I hope that we shall presently win clear of the difficulties threatening us."

"I join you in the hope, sir," was the sport's smiling response. "While the whole affair is new and strange to me, I have taken the word of Dick, here, and Fairfax, the rancher, and am here to lend any assistance in my power. So pray command me for any service you may desire."

Dorritt bowed his acknowledgment, and was about to continue the subject when a small bell tapped sharply in the barroom, calling him away.

"There is a deep scheme afoot," explained Faro Dick, taking up the subject as the bulky form of the marshal disappeared. "Just what the next move may be we know not, but we do know that it involves possession of the Orient Mine. It is the stake at issue."

"Rightly speaking, the Occidental Mining Company have no legal right in the Occident Mine, save that of possession. The mine was discovered by one Duval Kingsley and his partner, Justin Fairfax, the bachelor uncle of your friend, Jasper Fairfax. Prendergree and his crowd jumped the claim, killing Fairfax, it is believed, and driving Kingsley away."

"But Kingsley was not to be denied his rights. Securing the assistance of

his nephews, Duke and Basil Drumm, he returned to Occident, determined to openly demand the mine. Here, again, he was baffled, for at supper he was poisoned, before he had made his errand publicly known.

"Foiled by the death of Kingsley, the Drumms decided to give up their errand; but, in burying the old man, their uncle, they struck a new lead so rich and promising that they determined to return and work it, whether or not they ever succeeded in wresting the original mine from the possession of the desperadoes.

"To strengthen themselves against the possibility of a forcible ouster, the Drumms determined not only to bring a strong force with them, but to settle the adjacent valleys with friends and relatives, and thus establish a base for supplies.

"So it came about that Nathan Fairfax, the brother of Justin and father of Jasper, made his home in one of the valleys of the range, while Major Benson Lee, the brother-in-law of Kingsley, settled not far away.

"These two families and the Drumms were the only surviving kindred of the original discoverers of the Occident, and their heirs-at-law. This fact soon became known to Prendergree and his associates, and upon their possession of that knowledge hinges all the present trouble.

"It was only yesterday that we got at the truth of the matter—the real cause for the threatened raid of the neighboring valleys by the so-called Prince Mars."

"A raid which has already occurred," gravely amended Cool Creede, who had listened with closest attention to his fellow sport's hurried narrative.

"I feared as much when I saw the girl to-night," Faro Dick declared, with an ominous knitting of his white brows. "Now, let us sum up the case and see just where we stand.

"Major Lee's daughter is in the hands of the enemy, and it is only a fair presumption that the major himself has been killed or captured."

"He is dead, I think," averred Cool Creede, and he thereupon tersely described his encounter with the Demon Horseman at the ford in Death Canyon, with the further explanation:

"At sight of her father's body in the arms of the mysterious rider, Miss Lee fainted. By the time consciousness returned, the outlaws were again close upon us, the pursuit lasting until we had gained the shelter of your place, a bit ago."

As he listened, the perturbed look on the face of the White Sport deepened.

"I fear that the major is, indeed, out of the race," he averred, when Creede had finished. "I have always suspected that the Demon Rider was none other than Justin Fairfax, crazed by injuries received during the struggle for the mine; but, even if this suspicion is correct, the major might fare ill at his hands.

"But to resume: Yesterday morning the Drumms were missing, and not a trace of them has been discovered. They have been abducted or slain.

"Thus, you see, the four heirs of Duval Kingsley have been gotten out of the way, and we know not what may have happened to Nathan Fairfax and his family, the sole heirs of Justin Fairfax."

For a full minute the two men stared at each other questioningly.

"The next step, then, is to jump the Orient Mine?" Creede Cool intimated.

"Yes; that step has been arranged. But there is a yet darker move on foot.

"The Drumms, Fairfaxes and Lees have carried the Occident matter to the Territorial courts, with a strong probability of gaining the mine. To offset the court's decree, and to obtain legal possession of the Orient, the inhuman devils have decided that the daughters of Fairfax and Lee shall be forced into marriage with two of their number, while young Fairfax is to be given his choice between death and the espousal of Prendergree's daughter."

"Impossible!" and Cool Creede leaped to his feet, livid with indignation.

"Oh, no! It is the simple truth of the matter, as unearthed by Dorrit, barbarous as it may seem," Faro Dick insisted, energetically. "You see, the whole gang are secretly affiliated with the Saints, and are not likely to hesitate at irregularities in the matrimonial line."

Further discussion was at that moment cut short by the abrupt reappearance of Dorrit.

The veteran's face was clouded, and his red beard fairly bristled with disgust.

"Ince is getting ready to leave camp, bound for headquarters," he announced, standing in the doorway with his hands upon his hips. "Headquarters, mind ye, and not a spy in camp to put at his heels!"

"Mounted or afoot?" asked Cool Creede, quickly.

"Hossback!"

"Get me a horse!—I'll try the trick!" was the ready response; and while the veteran, detective and marshal, now beaming with delight, darted toward the stables, the man in buckskin carefully examined his weapons and slung his repeater at his back.

Five minutes later he rode out of Orient, hot on the trail of Gambler Ince.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MOUNTAIN STRONGHOLD.

"My son, a captain approaches!"

These words, uttered in a harsh and strident voice, came from the lips of a woman standing, half concealed, in a niche in the face of a bold cliff some five miles to the northeast of Prickly Pear Camp.

A tall, gaunt woman, straight as an arrow, with coarse, harsh, jet-black hair and brilliant, though deeply sunken, black eyes. Her face, thin to emaciation, was of the color of parchment, and in its shrunk, shriveled features betrayed the ravages of advanced age. The nose, large and prominent and sharply hooked, gave a vulturous expression to the face, which was heightened by the curved, talon-like fingers with which she clung to the rocks.

Garbed in a long, black gown, belted at the waist with the dried skin of a large rattlesnake, this singular woman stood in bold relief against the dull, gray rocks.

"My son, my son! A captain approaches!"

Harshly sibilant, like the hissing of an angry snake, came this second hail, and then the one addressed leaped into view—a man, tall and ungainly, with an unsightly hump between his shoulders. A long sword, sheathed in a scabbard of gold, clanked at his side, and the rays of the morning sun flashed brightly upon the gold buttons of his purple uniform.

"It is well, my Queen!" he returned, inclining himself profoundly, and speaking in a deep, full, musical voice. "He comes, I doubt not, for counsel and for guidance, so come, my Queen; let us receive him with the pomp and ceremony due our rank."

Quitting that dangerous niche in the rocks, the mysterious woman silently accompanied her attendant along the narrow, winding pathway to the summit, where a scene at once singular and grotesque was revealed.

The crest of the peak, perhaps five acres in extent, was as level, almost, as the top of a table, and thickly studded with a species of dwarf pine. In the center of the summit rose a huge, irregular mass of stone, at first glance of natural formation, but which a closer inspection would have revealed to be of cunningly contrived masonry.

Here, then, was the "castle" of the League Queen, the home and the fortress of Prince Mars; a fortress with almost impregnable walls, and with every approach commanded by howitzers mounted on swivels.

Upon gaining the summit the hunchback placed a whistle to his lips and blew a shrill blast.

Scarcely had the echoes died away when a lithe, trimly-built fellow approached, coming from the shelter of the pines, saluted, and quietly awaited orders.

"A captain comes, Daniels," uttered the hunchback, speaking slowly and carefully, as if weighing each word. "Get the countersign, then lower the chasm bridge and admit him."

Again saluting, Daniels turned and hurried away, while the Queen and her escort proceeded direct to the fortress.

Here the sentry on duty inclined himself, then touched some hidden lever, causing the heavy stone door to swing back upon its hinges, and the evil pair entered.

A long, low, irregular apartment lay before them, not unlike a cavern in the rocks. At the far end of this gloomy chamber was a raised platform of stone, some eighteen inches in height, upon which, under a black, gold-embroidered canopy, stood a large chair, fashioned of stout pine boughs.

Taking a scepter and a crown of silver inlaid with gold from a recess in the wall, the League Queen seated herself in the chair beneath the canopy and calmly assumed the duties of her office.

The minutes dragged by slowly and painfully, until nearly a quarter of an hour had passed. Then the door was suddenly flung open without announcement, and a man strode into the room, halting at the edge of the platform.

This man was Gambler Ince. His face was pale and wore a perturbed look.

"Rise, my son," the Queen ordered, when Ince had paid his respects. "Free your mind, for I see you are ill at ease."

"And with good cause, my Queen, for it has been my fortune to detect a traitor divulging the secrets of the League," the gambler returned.

"Ha! say you so?" and the hunchback stepped forward.

"Yes, my Prince, even so."

"The man?"

"He whom we have known as Arkansaw."

"And he escaped?"

"He is dead."

"That is well, my brother. May all traitors perish as quickly."

"But tell us the story," and Prince Mars motioned the gambler to a seat at the feet of the Queen.

"We are in trouble and in doubt at the camp, Oh, Queen! and I was sent this morning to seek counsel and aid," Gambler Ince began, as he seated himself upon the edge of the platform. "Things have not gone well with us, and our enemies are becoming bold and venturesome. Their strength is growing and we must strike quickly, or we shall lose."

"Last night we made the venture we had planned and lost."

"The deuce!" and Prince Mars leaned forward with a look of incredulity.

"Yes, we failed," iterated Ince, unmindful of that expression of princely disfavor. "The trick wouldn't work, and instead of carrying away Faro Dick's money, he captured ours."

"Then, that meddlesome sport or detective, whichever he may be, appeared with Major Lee's daughter, and trouble began in earnest."

"But the girl's here, fast enough!" the Queen interjected, with a haggish chuckle.

"Yes, in the trouble that followed, I succeeded in cutting her out from her friends and placed her in the hands of the Deserter Chief," Ince explained. "But no sooner had affairs become straightened out than I became embroiled with Faro Dick, with the result that a duel is to be fought between us this coming midnight."

The beldame gave her head a decisive shake.

"My son, you know it is against the rules of the League for one wearing the sacred emblem to imperil his life and his secret by open fight," she exclaimed.

"Alas, my Queen! only too well do I know it, else the matter would have been settled ere this," Gambler Ince returned, in sepulchral tones. "And I have come to plead, as a special favor, that you absolve me from wearing the emblem this one day."

"Alas, my son! that is impossible!" the Queen declared. "Is there no way in which you may avoid this duel?"

"There is no way, my Queen, save by flight. If we both live till the midnight hour, one must die by the other's hand."

Again the beldame shook her head, this time swaying gently to and fro and muttering:

"Bad—bad! very bad!"

Then, with a vivid snap of her sunken eyes:

"Prince, my son, it devolves upon you to remove this troublesome sport, and thus protect your brother."

"Command your followers in the camp to see that he dies before the midnight hour."

"Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, my Queen; and your will shall be my law."

"It is well, my son," and the League Queen leaned back in her chair with a breath of relief, saying:

"Proceed, my son. Tell us of the traitor whom you punished."

Expressing his thanks for the favor shown him, Gambler Ince continued:

"It was on my way here, my Queen, that a singular sight presented itself to me, and I stopped to investigate."

"In the blind canyon near the falls of Old Hat Creek, a dozen well-armed men were in camp, and from the lights I recognized among them Fairfax, the rancher's son, and the man Arkansaw."

"Arkansaw was made fast to a boulder, and heaped around him was burning wood."

"Then it was all plain to me. He had fallen into their hands, and with fire they were trying to torture from him the secrets of our League."

"That he had yielded, I read in their actions, and to seal his lips for evermore I fired a bullet through his brain."

"You did well, my son. May all our brothers prove as true."

Then the Queen arose, a sign that the audience was at an end, and the gambler at once took his departure.

CHAPTER XXI.

TRAILING THE GAME.

Cool Creede could not help feeling that the game before him was a most desperate one.

Gambler Ince was said to be a man of iron nerve, wary as a fox, and as merciless as death when his evil passions were aroused.

Then, too, he was riding to his own stronghold, through a country thickly peopled with those of his ilk, so that a signal from his lips might at any moment call a dozen desperate characters to cover his trail.

But the sport was a stranger to fear, cool and crafty, and he entered the game to win.

Scribbling a note to Prendergree, appointing a time and place for meeting, he made arrangements with Faro Dick for its delivery, then followed Dorrit straight to the hotel corral, where he found the marshal putting saddle and bridle upon a horse.

"I think we'd better muffle the critter's hoofs," the sport suggested. "It will be necessary to keep close upon Ince's heels till daylight, at least, and the striking of a naked shoe against a stone would likely mar the programme."

"Yes, sirree!" the veteran cheerily assented. "We'll fix that part of it; but if he does get onto the game, just drill him through an' through."

Then he seized and quartered a heavy horse blanket and proceeded to muffle the animal's hoofs with a skill and dexterity bespeaking long practice at the trick.

"Thar' ye are," he exclaimed, a moment later, as he drew back and surveyed his work with a critical eye. "Reckon thar'll never be a clip nor a ring to give ye away."

"Now, I'll slip out in front an' watch for Ince, to give ye the word. Fox him right to the den, if ye can; if not, take keer of yerself."

The two men shook hands, and Dorrit

hurried away, while the sport vaulted lightly into the saddle to await the word.

With such celerity had the veteran detective worked, that he was just in time to see Ince fording the creek. Then, as the gambler turned up stream, he hastened back and gave the sport the word.

Riding out from the shadow of the building, Cool Creede hastily scanned his surroundings; that done, he set forward at a gallop.

The moon was now low in the western sky, but yet gave light enough to enable one to distinguish objects at a considerable distance.

Gambler Ince was some four or five hundred yards away, sweeping along the rough trail with the easy assurance of one thoroughly familiar with his surroundings.

Not until he had gained the gap in the range through which the trail ran did he pause or look back; and at that moment, as if divining the gambler's intention, Cool Creede deftly swung his horse into the densest of the shadows bordering the roadway, and came to a halt.

So quickly and skillfully was this move executed, that Ince failed to detect his pursuer, and in a moment struck spurs to his horse and galloped onward.

Then, as the regular beat of iron-shod hoofs came to his ears, the sport again set forward and a minute later entered the gap.

"Here is a pretty how-to-do!" he soliloquized, as he cantered along with every sense on the alert. "Deerfoot and the boys are in camp at the blind canyon, and the chances are about a hundred to one that the sentry will hail Ince, and thus spoil the game."

But the expected did not happen.

There was, in fact, no sentry at the canyon entrance, and Gambler Ince was thus left to push on unchallenged.

A half mile up the trail he turned abruptly to the north, fording a small stream tributary to Old Hat Creek, and entering a break in the range, where he dismounted and led his horse into a cavern.

The moon was now beneath the crests of the western peaks, but the eastern sky was light with the coming dawn, and the gambler seated himself upon a stone and calmly waited.

Meanwhile, Cool Creede had ridden into a clump of timber south of the trail, where he dismounted and tethered his horse; then retraced his steps and cautiously waded across the stream.

The man-hunting instincts of the sport-detective were now thoroughly aroused, and as if by divination he reached the conclusion that the remainder of the chase should be run afoot.

Proceeding with the utmost caution, he entered that narrow, almost unnoticeable break in the northern wall of the gap, and a moment later located his quarry.

The gambler, wholly unsuspecting of pursuit, was sitting with his head bowed in his hands, awaiting daybreak, and deeply engrossed with the desperate schemes of the Mormon clan.

Shrinking into the deeper shadows of that gloomy nook, Cool Creede patiently waited until the coming day had partially dispelled the darkness, when Ince arose and slowly ascended a narrow zigzag path leading up the mountain side.

Waiting until a bold spur shut the gambler from sight, the sport nimbly followed, noting even in the early morning gloom that the pathway bore traces of daily use. Then, as he cautiously rounded a jutting angle of the spur, he again sighted Ince, less than fifty yards distant, toiling up a steep and dangerous ascent.

To advance, just then, was to hazard all, and with a grim smile the patient trailer seated himself at the foot of the spur.

Step by step the gambler toiled onward, till the summit of the cliff was gained, then turned quickly, and searchingly surveyed the course he had covered, as if at last suspicious of surveillance.

But the matchless craft and cunning of the spy upon his track again baffled him,

for no sign of a living presence was to be detected, and after a moment's rest, Ince resumed his way, keeping to the edge of the wide terrace, which curved sharply to the westward, ending at the canyon in which were encamped Cool Creede's followers.

"That means the discovery of Deerfoot and the boys," the sport muttered, in a vexed tone, and rising to his feet he darted swiftly and noiselessly across the open to the foot of the cliff, which he mounted with the nimbleness and skill of an old mountain-man.

Even in that moment of waiting his ready wits had decided upon a plan of action, while his eyes singled out the course.

Crouching under the edge of the terrace until he felt assured there was no danger of a backward glance from Ince, he suddenly scrambled upon the level and with quick, cat-like steps, crossed to the foot of the next rise, at that point a distance of nearly a hundred yards.

Here luck proved his friend. It was momentarily growing lighter, and a single backward glance from the gambler would have revealed to him that his steps were being dogged.

And the glance came; but not until the sport was snugly covered by a projection in the frowning wall marking the northern boundary of the terrace.

Then, as Gambler Ince again strode onward, the sport carefully scanned the face of the cliff, selected his course and slowly mounted upward to the second terrace, two hundred feet above.

It was an extremely hazardous feat, and to one less sure-footed, lithe and muscular, impossible; yet it was accomplished, for, slowly, painfully, the iron-nerved sleuth dragged himself upward, until he stood upon the huge "bench"—weak, almost exhausted, perspiration dripping from every pore!

Dropping upon a boulder, Cool Creede rested himself a moment; then he rose and hurried forward, as the form of the gambler was growing dim and indistinct in the distance.

Thus onward hurried the two men, Ince with quick, nervous stride, as if impatient to reach his goal; the sport shadowed at a yet swifter pace, anxious to close that now dangerously long gap between himself and his quarry.

When within fifty yards of the canyon, Ince suddenly crossed the terrace and began to ascend the cliff to the upper plateau.

Fortunately for the pursuer, he was close enough to detect that move the moment it was made, and instantly sought shelter.

On gaining the plateau, Ince unslung his rifle and approached the canyon with slow and stealthy steps.

It was evident that he had, in some manner, discovered the camp below.

After the gambler, with the stealth of the leopard of the jungle stealing upon its prey, crept Cool Creede, revolver in hand.

He knew that discovery was now imminent.

The plateau, unlike the terrace below, did not end at the canyon, but bent sharply to the northward, following the trend of the mountain for some hundreds of yards, and finally breaking off in sharp, irregular slopes.

Around this angle strode the gambler, leaping a number of small gullies worn in the stony soil by descending freshets, and sheltering himself behind the sparse growth of bushes fringing the verge, until he had gained a point commanding the view he desired.

Extending himself at full length on the ground, with his rifle at his side, he gazed steadily at the scene below.

Not a whit less anxious than Gambler Ince was Cool Creede to look upon the camp. Boldly crossing the open, he entered one of the gullies and cautiously crept down to the canyon.

The dark shadows of the early dawn yet filled the basin ending the canyon, but, thanks to the camp-fire, a fairly good view was obtainable.

To the surprise of the sport, Jasper Fairfax was there, and in the midst of the men was a stranger—a captive.

Gambler Ince recognized the latter, for with a start of surprise he muttered:

"By Heavens! that captive is Arkansaw!"

"My coming is most fortunate, for I do not trust that man. I feel that to save himself, he will disclose all he knows of the League."

"I will watch, and if I discover that he shows a sign of weakening, I will seal his lips with death."

That the gambler kept his word, the reader knows.

CHAPTER XXII.

UNMASKED.

Down in the camp, the moment following that dastardly shot of Gambler Ince, was one of dire confusion.

But Deerfoot's men were trained frontiersmen, and out of disorder order quickly came, for all sprang to cover and with weapons in hand silently awaited the attack which that single shot seemed to presage.

But the attack came not, and after a moment of inaction Deerfoot and Fairfax advanced into the open and called the men together.

Three were at once despatched down the canyon to watch the trail, while half a dozen more sought a place to scale the wall.

Then Deerfoot and the rancher gave their attention to Arkansaw, the outlaw.

The ball had passed directly through his head, and death had been instantaneous.

"Poor devil! he weakened at our bluff, and yet met his fate," the chief observed, as he scattered the heap of wood and cut away the things holding the dead man to the bowlder.

"And it is safe to bet that some one of his own gang killed him," Fairfax averred.

"Oh, yes; I do not doubt that. Detecting our presence here, they put a spy upon our movements, and he fired the shot to cut short the confession."

Then they laid the dead outlaw upon a long, flat stone, and carefully searched his pockets and his clothing.

But nothing in the nature of a clue to his identity or evidence against the League was brought to light, and they folded his hands and covered his face, and turned away, Fairfax to enter a tent, and seek the rest of which he was in such sore need, Deerfoot to direct the movements of his men.

The morning hours passed rapidly.

The attempt to scale the canyon walls had proved a failure, but three of the men were sent down to the trail, shortly after sunrise, to seek a pathway leading to the heights, and succeeded in reaching the plateau.

On their return they reported finding the lurking places of two men, but were unable to follow the trail of either, owing to the stony formation of the mountain at that point.

Then one of the men sent to watch the trail returned to report the finding of a horse tethered in a small clump of timber on the southern side of the gap, and he was sent back to his post with a reinforcement of two men, with instructions to ambush and capture the owner of the horse on his return.

A grave was dug and the dead outlaw decently buried, and then nothing occurred to break the dull monotony of the camp until the middle of the afternoon, when a thrill of excitement was caused by the sudden appearance of four of the five men sent to ambush the trail, with a horseman in their midst.

And that horseman was Cool Creede!

His appearance was hailed with delight by the men in camp, for the report brought in by Fairfax that morning had been anything but reassuring, hinting, as it did, so strongly at the capture or death of the daring sport.

Explanations were made, in which Fairfax, aroused from his sleep by the excitement caused by this important ar-

rival, joined, and a thorough understanding of the case in hand was soon reached.

After a hearty meal, Cool Creede entered his tent and slept a couple of hours; then, refreshed, he arose, shaved himself and laid aside his buckskin suit for the garb of a sport. Leaving orders to have six of the men follow him by twos, he mounted, and, accompanied by Fairfax, started back to Prickly Pear Camp.

The sun was yet an hour high when the two men turned from the canyon into the trail, and as they rode onward at a leisurely pace they discussed the Fairfax and Lee tragedies, and the motives leading thereto, as explained to the sport by Faro Dick.

Arrived at Orient, they rode direct to the hotel corral, put up the horses, and entered the bar-room.

Dorrit was the first man to greet them. Warning of their approach had been duly conveyed to the veteran by his spies, and he at once led them into his private room.

"Things are b'illin'!" he explained, with a mysterious wink. "This duel has set things a-whoopin'. Half o' Occident is over hyar, an' some o' Orient is over thar'. Some one has been payin' fer a heap o' bug juice, an' I do reckon this'll be ther p'isonest night o' Prickly Pear."

"But I'm blamed glad ter see ye, boys. Jest wait a minute till I call Dick in, an' then we'll do some talkin'."

Motioning the friends to seats, the marshal hurriedly quitted the room, to return a moment later, accompanied by Faro Dick.

It was evident that the White Sport had just quitted his bed, after some hours of sound, refreshing sleep. His blue-gray eyes were clear and bright, and he looked fresh and vigorous.

Greetings were exchanged, and the four men proceeded to discuss matters.

"You first, Sport," suggested Dorrit, with a nod to Creede which plainly betrayed how keenly anxious he was to learn the result of that early morning chase. "Tell us about Ince."

Cool Creede reflected a moment, then laughed lightly, saying:

"There's precious little to tell, my good friend Bolly, but that little you shall hear."

"On leaving camp, Ince rode north to Wagon Trail Gap, then up it a mile, perhaps, to a break in the walls, where he abandoned his horse and ascended the mountain."

"He discovered my friends in the blind canyon, shot dead an outlaw Fairfax had captured, and went on his way along the mountain side rejoicing."

"About three miles beyond the canyon I lost him."

"Lost him?" Dorrit exclaimed, visibly disappointed.

"Yes; if you have ever been over on that part of the range you know that a canyon, like that of Old Hat Creek, I believe, cuts the mountain squarely in two."

"The northern half, or crag, rises in almost perpendicular lines from the water surface in the canyon to a height considerably above the surrounding peaks."

"It was while Ince was standing upon the southern verge of this canyon, apparently studying the opposite wall, that I lost him."

"I had closed up to within a hundred yards of the fellow, and was seeking the shelter of a heap of bowlders when I heard voices, and at once looked for Ince."

"But he had disappeared, and not a trace of him remained, though I searched the place most carefully."

"Returning to the covert behind the bowlders, I determined to wait and watch. Not many minutes had elapsed when the gambler suddenly reappeared upon the canyon verge, in the exact spot I had last seen him, as mysteriously as if dropped from the skies."

"With one swift glance at his surroundings, he hurriedly retraced his steps along the mountain side, descended to the cavern in which he had left his horse, stretched himself upon a rude bank in the wall and went to sleep."

"That is all, gentlemen, save that Deerfoot put one of his men to watch the cavern and trail the gambler when he leaves."

The marshal drew a long breath of relief.

"C'u'dn't 'a' done better myself!" he chuckled. "It's ther nighest home we've ever tracked any o' ther gang, an' we'll soon find whar'aways they drop in ther canyon."

The conversation then turned upon the approaching duel and affairs in the camp, and in a few minutes the council broke up.

Faro Dick, Cool Creede and Fairfax at once repaired to the Ace of Spades.

Although the light of day had not yet faded from the western sky, the gambling-hall was crowded—an unfailing augury of lively times in store.

On entering the room the White Sport proceeded straight to the faro tables, leaving the two friends to follow at their leisure.

As previously noted, the main floor of the hall was filled with tables and chairs for short-card players, and it was among these that Cool Creede and Fairfax first made their way.

But, when near the door, the young rancher suddenly paused and lightly touched the arm of the sport.

"See!" he exclaimed, in a low, carefully guarded tone. "The man at the table there, alone—it is the outlaw Red Mike, disguised!"

Cool Creede instantly glanced in the direction indicated, and a puzzled look came over his face.

Seated at the end of the table, idly, toying with a pack of cards, was a tall, finely-built fellow, with gleaming black eyes and bushy black beard and hair, and roughly garbed as a miner.

Then the fellow looked up, and he started sharply as his eyes encountered the keen gaze of the sport.

With a swift, pantherish leap, Cool Creede bounded forward, his gray eyes glowing like coals. Grasping the blue flannel shirt of the miner, he ripped it open at the throat, disclosing a stout silver chain, fastened with a padlock of gold.

"Look!" the sport ejaculated. "It is Kent Keene, the Deserter Chief, and he wears the token of the accursed League!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

FORCING A TRUCE.

Loud and clear rang the voice of the venturesome sport, and on the instant he and the man struggling in his grasp became the center of an excited, turbulent throng.

That the bold accusation was true none doubted, for the look of surprise and rage upon the face of the artfully-disguised outlaw quickly gave way to one of consternation, and he nervously attempted to rise from the chair.

"Sit still!" ordered Cool Creede, sternly, as he stepped back a pace and swung both hands to a level, each bearing a gleaming revolver. "You are a prisoner, and at your choice of dead or alive!"

Promptly Jasper Fairfax had wheeled about, and now stood back to back with the intrepid sport, his weapons covering the crowd.

"Elbow room, please!" he uttered, in a cool, steady voice, betraying no tremor of excitement. "Make room for the marshal!"

Bolly Dorrit had, indeed, entered the room, and was slowly working his way through the crowd, closely followed by two stalwart deputies.

But the bewilderment occasioned by the boldness and suddenness of the arrest was quick to wear away, and loud murmurs and threats arose here and there in the crowd from the friends and allies of the outlaw.

"Down ther sport—he's too fresh!"

"He lies—et's not ther Desarter Chief!"

"Et's an Orient bluff ter hurt Occident! Kill ther cuss!"

These cries and many others of similar import rang loudly through the room,

betraying only too plainly the fact that the followers of the entrapped Deserter Chief were there in large numbers.

But Cool Creede was not the man to weaken or yield in the face of odds, and with a tersely uttered warning to the crowd, he gamely stood his ground until the marshal and his deputies had gained his side.

"Who is et?" the veteran asked, peering sharply at the white, tensely-drawn face of the captive.

The sport laughed lightly.

"Perhaps Prince Mars himself!" he returned. "In any event, Red Mike, Kent Keene and the Deserter Chief—all in one."

"Take him in, Bolly, and hold him for keeps!"

"Trust me!" the marshal exclaimed, with a visible start of surprise, and then with a movement of bewildering swiftness he snapped a pair of steel manacles upon the wrists of the outlaw.

A howl of rage went up from the nearest of the captive's followers, and with one accord they surged forward, determined to wrest him from the marshal.

But in this they were doomed to disappointment.

Through the open doorway came the ponderous form of Jared Prendergree, his powerful arms working like flails and pushing those before him right and left to clear a way through that excited throng.

On, until he had reached the table beside which the captive sat, and then his hand fell heavily upon the shoulder of Dorrit, swinging the marshal around, until they stood face to face.

"What is the meaning of this?" the mine-manager demanded, his massive face working with nervous anger, as he pointed to the prisoner. "Do you know that man?"

"By reputation only," was the cool reply. "He's said ter be ther Desarter Chief."

"Poof! nonsense!" and Prendergree's oily cheeks puffed out with disgust and incredulity. "That is Bill Clark, one of the best and steadiest men in our mine. I'll go bail for him!"

"Sartainly! Sartainly, ef ther offenses charged ag'in' him are of a bailable nature," and Dorrit chuckled audibly.

"But I reckon, Mr. Prendergree, we'll hev' ter let ther law take et's course. Ther charges hev' b'in made by two mighty good men; ef they are not proved, yer Mr. Bill Clark will go free, an' none ther wuss off, either, I reckon."

"Oh, certainly; the law must take its course, now that the charges have been made," Prendergree frowningly assented; "but the idea is simply preposterous, and these gentlemen have made the biggest kind of a mistake."

"To err is human," Cool Creede retorted, smilingly; "but in this case I am positive no mistake has been made, unless the man himself made it in venturing here."

"Look upon that, Jared Prendergree, and tell me what it is!" and again the sport flung open the outlaw's shirt, while his accusing finger pointed to the tell-tale token.

One swift glance and Prendergree's florid face grew white.

"I—I—how the deuce should I know?" he stammered, with a desperate simulation of carelessness. "A bauble that tickles the fellow's fancy, I suppose."

"Likely—very!" the sport retorted, a sneer marling his usual cool and deliberate utterance. "Upon your honor, Jared Prendergree, do you not know it to be the secret badge of authority worn by the six captains of Prince Mars?"

The clamor, stilled by the appearance of the mine-manager now broke out afresh throwing the swift denial trembling upon his lips.

"Death to Cool Creede!"

"Lynch him! kill him!"

A full score of voices were blended in these fierce, wild cries, and that ominous forward movement again began, despite the passive resistance of the assembled men of Orient.

Then, swift as the lightning's flash the

sport moved, yet with not a trace of fear upon his cool, smiling face. A single, tigerish bound, and he stood face to face with Prendergree, with the muzzle of a cocked revolver pressed squarely against the mine-manager's breast.

"Upon that table with you, and drive back your snarling dogs!" he commanded, his vividly glowing orbs meeting Prendergree's angry gaze undimly. "Up—or die! Quick!"

No idle threat was that; and, his face colorless as ashes with commingled rage and chagrin, Jared Prendergree sullenly stepped upon a chair, and thence to the top of the table.

"Steady!—all!" he cried, with uplifted hand, his deep, harsh voice distinctly audible in every nook and corner of the large room as he faced that turbulent assemblage. "Let there be no violence here. I feel, with a great many of you, that an injustice has been done, but this is not the time, nor the place, nor the way to remedy it. Let the law take its course, and all will be well and the mistake made clear."

A moment's hush followed; then there was a restless shifting of feet, and a burly fellow some feet distant demanded: "Do ye mean et that-a-way, boss? or—"

"Assuredly I mean it that way!" was the impatient interruption. "Let the law take its course. I know that Bill Clark is innocent of these trumped-up charges, and I am equally sure that he can prove it."

"So, go your way, now, and let the marshal of Orient do his duty."

It seemed, for the moment, that Prendergree had lost sight of the fact that his position as mediator was enforced. His voice rang out in imperative command, and Cool Creede exchanged a swift glance with the marshal.

Then the roughs put up their weapons and sullenly turned away, while Dorrit, aided by his two deputies and accompanied by half a dozen Orient men, hurried the prisoner out of the gambling-house and away to the calaboose.

Stepping down from the table, Prendergree confronted the sport.

"Mr. Cool, I came here in answer to your note of this morning," he explained, with unusual acerbity of manner. "I trust that you are now ready to proceed with the details of this duel between our friends."

"Quite ready, Mr. Prendergree."

"Then let us proceed at once to a settlement of time, place and weapons, as I am anxious to close the matter."

"Which being done, Mr. Cool, I shall call you to account for your conduct of a moment ago, and I trust you will afford me satisfaction."

"Certainly! certainly!" and the sport laughed lightly, as he seated himself at the table. But that is another story.

"Sit down, Mr. Prendergree, and let us do business."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ATTACK.

Meanwhile, an event fraught with deep and tragic interest was rapidly nearing the culminating point at the faro table presided over by the White Sport.

It will be remembered that upon entering the archway the sport had quitted his friend and gone directly to the raised platform at the rear of the room.

A single glance in that direction had been sufficient to tell him that he was needed.

The platform was crowded. The roulette wheels, densely surrounded by players, were whirling merrily, and the one faro game in operation was for high stakes, judging from the intense interest displayed by the throng of spectators about the table.

Passing behind the dealer, the White Sport relieved the man in the lookout's chair, with an order to open the other layout for play; then seated himself and quietly scanned the crowd surrounding three sides of the long table.

A rough lot they were, in the garb of miners and ranchmen, and all armed with

revolvers and knives. And in the entire crowd there was but one face familiar to Faro Dick.

It was that of McMurtree, marshal of Occident.

Seated directly opposite to the dealer was, perhaps, the most remarkable looking man in the throng.

He was an Indian—a full blood, tall, straight and sinewy as a panther, and dressed in the fatigue uniform of an army officer. On the table in front of him lay a self-cocking revolver of heavy caliber, and beside it, weighted to the table with a rouleau of golden eagles, was a bundle of banknotes of large denominations.

Between these articles and the edge of the layout was stack upon stack of red and blue checks.

That the bank was losing steadily and heavily to the redskin Faro Dick discerned at a glance. But the game was a square one, and he quietly held his place in the lookout's chair a moment until the deal had ended, then exchanged seats with the dealer.

At this move the Indian scowled and half arose, as if tempted to quit the table; then settled back into his chair and grimly awaited the new deal.

It was at this juncture that the voice of Cool Creede was heard at the other end of the room denouncing the Deserter Chief, and for the moment all eyes turned in that direction, while a number of fellows descended from the platform and hurried forward.

Despite his coolness and nerve, Faro Dick could not help feeling that the situation was growing most critical, for it needed no second glance to tell him the strangers in the place were desperadoes of the worst stamp and there seeking trouble.

That Prendergree and Ince had been instrumental in thus packing the Ace of Spades with the mountain bandits he did not doubt, and his mustached lips settled in firm, hard lines, as he saw the mine-manager enter the door and force his way to the side of the captive.

And more, the keen eyes of the White Sport detected an expression of satisfaction upon the dusky face of the Indian as the heavy voice of Prendergree rang through the place, and he at once jumped to the conclusion that this personage was none other than Silver Sam, the Shoshone.

This same idea had also occurred to the man in the lookout's chair, and as he caught a swift glance and a nod from Faro Dick he silently slipped out of his seat and left the room.

Then it was that Prendergree, covered by the revolver of Cool Creede, mounted the card table and urged the roughs to desist. Through an opening in the shifting crowd, Faro Dick caught sight of the weapon in the sport's hand, and instantly read the mine-manager's action aright.

Not so the redskin, whom the White Sport and his ally had rightly conjectured to be Silver Sam, the Shoshone. As the deliberately uttered words of Prendergree came to his ears, his expression changed, the look of quiet satisfaction giving way to a puzzled air, and he sullenly faced the sport.

"Deal, senor," he curtly exclaimed. "The trouble is ended and nobody hurt."

"And it is fortunate for the roughs and toughs who have crowded into Orient this day that it has ended so," was the cool rejoinder, as Faro Dick slipped the pack into the box.

"Meaning—"

"Exactly what I said."

"You are seeking a quarrel, senor?"

"I seek a quarrel with no man."

The Shoshone settled down in his chair and began placing his bets; but there was a wicked gleam in his dark eyes which did not escape the White Sport.

Then the deal began, and from the first turn of the cards the redskin steadily lost, until the last of the checks he had won were again in the bank's possession, together with a number of the banknotes and the rouleau of gold.

And that he lost with ill grace was

evident to all. No word of complaint passed his tightly shut lips while playing, but his dusky face assumed a yet darker hue, and his eyes gleamed with sullen rage.

Suddenly pushing back from the table, he secured the remainder of his money; then sprang to his feet, revolver in hand.

"It is a brace game!" he shouted, his voice rising above the confused murmur filling the place. "You have cheated me, Faro Dick, and you shall die!"

Then, before a hand could be lifted to prevent it, the heavy report of the red-skin's revolver jarred through the room, and the White Sport slipped limply from the chair to the floor.

"Killed him, by the eternal smoke!" exclaimed McMurtree, as he sprang to the side of Silver Sam, revolvers in hand. "Surround the table, boys! The sport's our meat, and we'll confiscate the coin in the money drawer!"

Not loudly, yet in tones sufficiently penetrating to reach the ears of the majority of the roughs massing at the red-skin's back, came those significant words, and then Silver Sam and his Mormon ally hurriedly passed behind the faro layout.

But, cunningly planned and adroitly executed as had been the attack, it was not to succeed.

Up from the floor behind the table the White Sport suddenly sprang, alive and apparently unhurt, a self-cocking revolver in each hand, his blue-gray eyes aflame with the light of battle.

As one the two weapons exploded, and Silver Sam, the Shoshone, pitched forward upon his face, shot squarely through the head.

McMurtree was no more fortunate. The second ball struck him in the region of the heart, and he fell heavily across the body of the fallen redskin.

Grimly the White Sport faced the oncoming crowd of roughs; his weapons raised to a level, his hands steady as adamant.

"Back, or die!" he enunciated, in cold, deliberate strains, utterly devoid of excitement or fear. "You have lost the game! Crowd but an inch, and you'll follow your leaders—one and all!"

"Ay! ay! that ye will!"

"Hands up, ye mis'abul galoots, or ye'll never git chalnace at fedge or jury!"

In the wheezy, but none the less distinct tones of Dorrit, the marshal, came that second challenge, and with a single backward glance the leader of the roughs returned his weapons to his belt and lifted up his empty hands—an example instantly followed by the half-score ruffians at his back.

And little wonder.

Ranged along the base of the platform were twenty of the men of Orient, stout, determined fellows all, each with a leveled Winchester in his hands.

The plot of the League, so far as it pertained to Faro Dick, the White Sport, had utterly failed.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MOUNTAIN LEAGUE.

"Just in time, pard Ned, and mighty well done, too!" Faro Dick exclaimed, with an approving nod, as his employee leaped lightly upon the platform. "I was beginning to fear you had missed the boys in some way."

"Oh, no; they were waiting, per agreement," the gambler returned. "I got your signal and slipped out to call in the men, but was stopped in the archway by two of the gang, who evidently suspected the nature of my errand. Of course, there was a knock-down argument, and that caused the delay."

"And Dorrit?"

"Had just landed his prisoner in the calaboose and stationed the guards when we passed coming back. Naturally, he took the lead."

"It has, indeed, turned out well," the White Sport declared, as he watched the work of Dorrit and his men in disarming and securing the baffled outlaws.

"But look yonder, Ned—there's more trouble brewing!"

True enough, the roughs at the far end of the room, reinforced by others of their ilk attracted from the street by the firing, were massing near the door in a threatening manner.

Opposed to them stood Cool Creede and Jasper Fairfax, supported by a dozen men of Orient.

"Prendergree has gone, but he sowed the seed," Faro Dick observed, grimly stroking his white mustache. Then, deftly recharging the empty chambers of his weapons, he added:

"Rally the boys, Ned, and follow me, if help is needed. Speak to Dorrit, and bring half of his men, too. We must nip this thing in the bud, or they'll jump the Orient Mine before morning."

"I'll do it," was the quiet response. "But they're acting queerly—all bluff and bluster."

"They lack a leader now, Ned, and if we act promptly the game is ours."

Even as the White Sport spoke he returned his revolvers to the holsters in his belt, descended from the platform and briskly moved forward.

"Hallo, hallo!" he exclaimed, as he advanced into the open space between the two factions, and boldly confronted the roughs. "What's the trouble now?"

For a moment no one answered; then a burly, heavily-bearded fellow stepped forward, and with an ugly grin said:

"We're a-kickin', sport, on ther cold deal ye're givin' our pards over yer, an' thar'll be shore-enough war ef they ain't let go—I'm a-tellin' ye!"

"So-ho! and that's where the shoe pinches!" quoth the sport, just the ghost of a smile playing around the corners of his mouth, while his strong white hands settled snugly upon the butts of his weapons. "And why should we let them go? They deserve hanging."

"Hangin'—nothin'!" snorted the fellow, in disgust. "Shore's you're born, sport, they're white men, all wool an' a yard wide, an' they jest came in hyar fer a leetle circus with ther kyards—an' now they're up ag'in' et!"

"Ye see, sport, thar's a crowd of us workin' ther placers over in ther valley to ther westward, an' es et was a long time between drinks, over thar, we jest concluded ter take a day off an' come over hyar an' fill up an' hev' a big time ginerally. I allow es how mebbe some of ther boys hes taken a drop too much, an' mebbe kicked up a dirty muss of et; but, sport, et ain't a hangin' matter, long es Orient whisky did et."

"So I says turn 'em loose, an' we'll all go home, fer our outfit didn't come fer ter hunt trouble."

Then the fellow smiled broadly, while his companions vigorously applauded his ingenious statement of the case.

"Et's straight es ther Gospel, what Big Dick hes been givin' ye, sport," cried one, and then all lifted up their voices in a howl of assent.

But the White Sport was too old a hand to be deceived by that kind of chatter, and with a swift movement he drew his weapons and covered the crowd, saying, crisply:

"That may all be as true as the Book, pards, but I'll have to ask you to take a walk, right now!"

"You see, this is my busy night, and as I have troubles of my own, please don't bother me with yours."

"Do you savvy?"

"Oh, yas!" and Big Dick scowled savagely. "But I reckon, sport, ye're making ther biggest kind of a mistake. Your crowd hes got ther drop now, but et won't be many moons till we'll come back at ye in a way ye'll not like! Mark thet!"

And with that threat Big Dick turned and strode out of the place, closely followed by the others of the gang.

"There's a good riddance for you," laughed the White Sport, as he put up his weapons and closed and barred the outer door of the gambling-hall. "And business is off for this night, at least!"

Cool Creede nodded approvingly. Then, after a moment's consultation, guards were placed in each of the archways

leading into the hotel, and the three friends sauntered back to the platform to take a look at Dorrit's prisoners.

A rough-looking lot they were, nine in all, and the White Sport laughed lightly as he glanced at the heap of small arms the marshal had stripped from them and placed upon the faro layout.

"Walking arsenals—one and all!" he exclaimed. "Creede, those fellows came here organized to clean out the camp; but the capture of the Deserter Chief rattled them, and they've made a misfit of the job."

"There were no less than three squads of them, and to-night Prince Mars is three captains shy."

"You mean—"

"I mean—but wait, and we'll see," and leading the way around the table, Faro Dick knelt beside his fallen assailants.

It was the work of but a moment to rip open the shirts of the two dead desperadoes, and then the sport's meaning was made clear.

Both Silver Sam and Marshal McMurtree wore the peculiar emblem of the Mountain League.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DUEL.

Leaving Jasper Fairfax and ten armed men in charge of the Ace of Spades and the batch of prisoners, Bolly Dorrit went out to reconnoiter the camp.

The veteran detective was confident that the broils of the early evening were simply to mask more important movements, and that the real mission of the outlaws in Orient was yet to be disclosed.

Under orders from Fairfax, the bodies of McMurtree and Silver Sam were placed upon tables and covered with cloths, while the nine prisoners were placed in a row on the edge of the platform and securely bound together.

Immediately after the disclosure of the true identity of McMurtree and the Shoshone, Cool Creede and the White Sport drew aside and seated themselves at one of the card-tables on the main floor.

The subject under discussion was the impending duel between the White Sport and Gambler Ince, and as Creede disclosed the terms of the affair, as settled upon by himself and Jared Prendergree, the Sport nodded approval.

"However the fight goes, it can never be said that Ince failed to receive a square deal," he declared, rising to his feet. "And that, too, after it was clearly established that he had used foul means to prevent an honorable meeting."

"Oh, there isn't a doubt that he urged on McMurtree and the Shoshone to assassinate you," Cool Creede returned. "The gathering of the desperadoes within this room to-night was not the work of chance, but by order of Prince Mars, the outlaw chief. However, it was a case of 'forewarned, forearmed,' and so they came to grief, despite their cunning plot."

"They do not suspect our true identity as yet, Dick, thanks to my absence and the artful disguise you have assumed; but we are none the less in desperate danger, and must use every precaution to prevent foul play."

"You think, then—"

"I think you will be jumped by that crowd of roughs on your way to the battle-ground if you do not go thoroughly disguised—just that, Dick."

The White Sport laughed lightly, but into his eyes leaped an angry light, and his strong white hands clinched fiercely.

"Let them have a care!" he exclaimed, bitterly. "The time for forbearance is gone, and henceforth it shall be measure for measure!"

"But come, Creede, the hour is near. The moon has cleared the peaks of the eastern ranges, and the valley is light as day. If we delay, they will say we shirk the task before us."

Then, with a word or two to Fairfax, the two sports left the gambling-hall, entering the hotel and going direct to Faro Dick's room.

That Cool Creede's warning was not to go unheeded was speedily attested by the movements of the White Sport.

Locking the door, he lighted a lamp, and quickly, yet carefully, set to work preparing for the conflict. Five—ten minutes went by, and then he suddenly confronted Cool Creede, completely metamorphosed.

A few deft strokes of the razor had sacrificed the luxuriant white mustache shading his firmly-cut mouth, and the skillful application of a dye had bronzed his skin to the hue of a son of the warm southland. A black slouched hat completely covered his white hair, and a Mexican serape masked the trim outlines of his athletic figure.

"Come," he exclaimed, seizing his repeating-rifle and unlocking the door. "I am ready to run the gantlet of hired assassins."

"I will lead the way. Follow, but not too closely."

Simply nodding, Cool Creede waited until Faro Dick had quitted the hotel, then went out, rifle in hand.

The night was yet young, but the full moon was slightly above the distant peaks, and her yellow light lay in a golden sheen upon the camps and the valley above and below.

That the precautions suggested by Cool Creede had been well taken was at once demonstrated by the watchful attitude of the groups of miners and roughs stationed here and there along the winding, irregular street.

The White Sport had passed undetected, but upon the appearance of his second a buzz of excitement rose upon the soft night air.

A glance down-stream disclosed Faro Dick, nearly one hundred yards distant, walking unconcernedly toward the point selected for the meeting, and with a breath of relief Cool Creede hurried onward.

Then the roughs selected to make away with the Orient duelist rallied in front of the hotel, assured that the White Sport was yet to appear.

On the opposite bank of the stream were grouped the denizens of Occident, and three hundred yards below could be seen the tall form of Jared Prendergree, and, beside him, Gambler Ince, rifle in hand.

With long, free strides Cool Creede closed the gap between himself and his principal, and a moment later the parties to the contest stood upon the appointed ground, on opposite banks of Old Hat Creek.

"Are you ready?" called Cool Creede, quickly.

"Is your man there?" retorted Prendergree, suspiciously. "We have no desire to fight a hired bravo."

"Have no fears on that score, Jared Prendergree!" coldly returned Faro Dick, throwing aside the serape and hat. "I am here in person."

Gambler Ince recoiled sharply, and his face grew white.

Prince Mars, the outlaw chief, had utterly failed.

"Are you ready?" Cool Creede repeated, a tinge of impatience in his clear voice.

"Ready!"

The seconds walked several paces upstream, leaving the principals face to face with the creek between them.

"Give the word—you won the toss," ordered Cool Creede, halting, revolver in hand.

Then the heavy voice of Prendergree was heard, slowly counting:

"One—two—three—"

Both rifles cracked, a shrill yell of terror and pain rang out, and Gambler Ince fell forward upon his face!

CHAPTER XXVII.

ADAH PRENDERGREE.

Upon a beautiful terrace in the mountain-side, within a rifle-shot of the Occident mine and overlooking the picturesque valley of Old Hat Creek, as it stretched away to the southward, stood a commodious log cabin, shaded by mountain pines and firs, its rough walls festooned with flowering vines.

Surrounding the house on three sides was a garden of fruit and vegetables, while on the fourth a cool, greensward, dotted with flowers, stretched from the

wide, covered porch to the stout gate in the palisades surrounding the place. In the rear of the house, and some two hundred feet distant, built to form a section of the palisades, was a large log stable, capable of accommodating from fifteen to twenty horses.

Here, upon this commanding terrace, was the home of Jared Prendergree.

The mine-manager's family consisted of a single child, a daughter of some eighteen or nineteen years of age, and rumors had it that she was most beautiful, headstrong and willful.

Not one of the denizens of Occident or of Orient had ever seen the face of Adah Prendergree. Although accustomed to daily rides up or down the valley upon the back of her mettlesome pony, her face was ever hidden in public behind the closely-woven meshes of a heavy veil of black.

That her form was one of lissome grace and beauty all could see, however, for her riding habits of costly material always fitted to perfection, and those to whom her voice had become familiar were wont to declare that it was of seraphic sweetness and purity.

Some four days preceding the events just narrated, Jared Prendergree suddenly appeared at home much earlier in the evening than was his usual custom, and it was at once apparent to the two servants employed about the place—an aged Irishman and his wife—that there was something of weighty importance upon their employer's mind.

Not only was his brow wrinkled with thought, but his whole face was black and lowering—the unfailing presage of a coming storm in that household.

"Be off with you, Pat, to the stables!" he growled, cuffing the old fellow out of a comfortable doze in a shaded corner of the porch. "It's the deuce of a fine time of the day for you to be loafing about!"

"Och, be aisy wi'd ye, mon!" the Irishman ruefully replied, scrambling up and rubbing his ears. "It's mesil' as is goin' dhis minit—bad loock to dhe sun dhat made me so daft!"

"Sun! Whisky, you mean, you infernal old fraud!" and Prendergree emphasized his words with a vicious kick, which missed its target by a narrow margin. "Stop at the kitchen and tell Bridget to send Adah out—rt once!"

Muttering and grumbling, old Pat disappeared around the corner of the house, and a few minutes later Adah Prendergree stepped from the hallway out upon the porch.

For a full minute father and daughter eyed each other sharply—the father with a sullen, suspicious glare in his dull gray eyes, the daughter with a look of defiance, if not open rebellion, upon her really beautiful face, while her black eyes snapped and twinkled in anticipation of the storm to come.

"Sit down," ordered Prendergree, sternly, and his hand indicated the particular seat he wished her to occupy. "I have some very particular business with you."

"Oh, you have, eh?" and the girl laughed sarcastically. "What's the racket this time? A mine to steal, or just a coach to rob?"

"Sit down, I tell you!" thundered Prendergree, brandishing his heavy arms wildly. "Give me no more of your wretched insolence, you miserable girl, or I'll give you a flogging that will bring you to your senses!"

"Don't you dare try it, dad!" screamed the girl, with a sudden blaze of anger, clinching her hands defiantly. "That game's played out!"

"Sit down, I tell you! You—"

"I won't!"

"You will!"

"I won't—won't—won't! So, there, you miserable old fraud!"

Prendergree stood aghast.

Stormy as had been preceding scenes between him and the willful girl, never yet had she gone to such lengths in her defiance.

"Girl, be careful! I am your father—your law—"

"You are, eh? Well, that sounds to me like a—Mormon sermon!"

"Adah!"

"Jared!"

Utterly baffled thus far, Prendergree paused and vigorously mopped his forehead. Inwardly he was fuming with rage; outwardly he was growing calm and collected.

"My dear child," he began, after a moment, in a voice quivering with well-simulated grief, "your ungrateful conduct touches me deeply. After all the love and affection I have lavished upon you—after all the expense of sending you East to school—"

"Oh! fiddlesticks!"

"To know that you're throwing yourself away upon a worthless scoundrel—"

"What's that?" and with the interruption the girl's eyes snapped firefully. "Say who's a miserable scoundrel! You—"

Again Prendergree's rage got the better of him, and he advanced toward his daughter, waving his clinched fists.

"Yes, miserable scoundrel! That's what I said, and that's what he is!" he yelled, his face growing purple with the effort. "But I'll fool you both! I've got a husband picked for you, and I'll see that you marry him, too, you deceitful, insolent minx!"

Then, for the first time, Adah Prendergree's face took on a look of deep concern; clasping her hands before her she mutely gazed at her father.

"And will I be the fifth, or sixth, or what, dad?" she asked, gravely, after a moment's reflection.

Prendergree stared at her in amazement.

"Fifth or sixth—what?" he asked.

Again Adah reflected, then replied:

"He's a Mormon, ain't he?"

"No!" roared Prendergree, breaking out afresh.

"That sounds like another—sermon, dad! And I won't be his fifth or sixth wife, then?"

"Girl! girl!—"

"Don't girl—girl me, you wretched creature!" shrieked Adah, in a sudden burst of rage. "Don't I know all about this Mormon business? Haven't I heard that the ninth Mrs. Prendergree died of a broken heart while you were courting the tenth? Go away, you miserable wretch! You're not my father! You stole me! You sha'n't pick a husband for me! I'll do that myself, and I'll marry Jasper Fairfax just as soon as he asks me! There, now!"

"Ah—oh!" gurgled Prendergree, clutching at his flabby red throat and lowering his gaze so that the excited girl might not read aright the sudden sparkle in his dull eyes. "You will, eh? We'll see about that!"

"And who the deuce is Jasper Fairfax?" Adah shrank back appalled. Too late she realized that in the heat of anger she had let slip the secret of her heart.

"And who the deuce is Fairfax?" Prendergree repeated, in thunderous tones. "Is he the infernal scoundrel you have been meeting clandestinely? Answer me, girl!"

"He is a gentleman, if you know what a gentleman is," was the sturdy response after a moment. "He saved my life one day. I have met him often; I will meet him again. And I will marry him, too, if—if he ever asks me to!"

Then overwrought nature gave way, and Adah began weeping violently and fled into the house.

Prendergree, growling unutterable anathemas so long as the girl was within hearing, stepped off the porch and around the corner of the house.

"Pat! Pat!" he yelled, at the top of his voice, adding, as the old fellow suddenly appeared from behind the house, where he had been listening to that stormy interview: "Pat, you scoundrel! see that Miss Adah leaves these grounds under no circumstances, day or night, till I tell you to let her go!"

"Yis, sor," and with a bow and a scrape Pat hurried away.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ABDUCTION.

True to the orders he had received, old Pat kept the gates to the high palisades and the doors of the stable securely

locked, and for the first time in the years she had dwelt there Adah Prendergree found herself a prisoner.

She raged and she stormed, she pleaded and entreated, but vainly, for the old Irishman was true to the master who employed him, and on the third day, apparently subdued in spirit, Adah grew silent and reserved, and kept to her room, determined to bide her chance to leave forever.

Prendergree wisely kept out of the way during those days. Too well he knew the vigor of the girl's tongue when she was aroused, and as his plans were steadily moving toward a seemingly favorable culmination, he was content to let matters rest.

But on the night of the duel all this was changed.

Shortly after nightfall, and before the moon had risen above the peaks to the east, the old servant was called to the stable by an unusual commotion among the horses.

On unlocking the door he stepped boldly into the stable, lantern in hand. Then a club in the hands of a masked man fell heavily upon his head, and he dropped to the floor, senseless.

"Well done, Dark Dave!" cautiously uttered a voice from the deeper gloom of one of the stalls, from which there immediately emerged three men. "Look to him, and see that he has no chance to raise an alarm, for this is about as ticklish a job as we ever tackled, and we can afford to take no risks."

Then the three filed silently out of the stable and up the path leading through the garden to the rear door of the house.

A glance through the open window disclosed the old Irishman's wife dozing in a chair in the middle of the room, and with the stealth of a panther creeping upon its prey the leader of the trio opened the door and entered.

From one of the pockets of his short sack coat he drew some stout twine and a pear-shaped gag, and in another minute the woman was bound and helpless, wholly unable to utter a sound.

With the unerring certainty of men intimately acquainted with their surroundings, the trio next proceeded direct to the room occupied by Adah Prendergree.

The door was locked, but a skeleton key quickly turned the bolt, and in another minute the three were in the room.

Adah had not yet retired. She was seated, fully dressed, in a comfortable rocker beside a small center-table, asleep. The rays of the lamp fell across her face, showing that it was white and drawn from confinement, brief as her enforced seclusion had been. Tear drops sparkling like diamonds on her long, dark lashes showed that she had been weeping.

Mutely the three men stood just within the room, feasting their eyes upon the beauty of that face which had so long been hidden from the gaze of the men of Occident and Orient.

Then the leader cautiously advanced until but a single step lay between him and the sleeping girl, when he leaned forward and lightly touched her forehead, saying:

"Awake, Miss Prendergree!"

Though not loudly spoken, that command instantly aroused the girl, and she sat upright in the chair, gazing in wide-eyed wonder at the masked intruders.

Yet no sign of fear escaped her.

"Upon my word, this is a bold deed!" she exclaimed, after a moment, as she deliberately rose to her feet, her black eyes flashing wrathfully. "What do you scoundrels want?"

The leader inclined himself profoundly.

"You, Miss Prendergree, to be perfectly frank about it," he returned, in the pleasantest tone at his command. "And I trust that you will go with us quietly, without noise or fuss."

"Oh, indeed!" and Adah drew herself up haughtily. "By what right do you villains make this demand?"

"By the might, lady, that makes right."

"Coward!"

"That is a hard word, lady."

"But deserved! You came here to make

war upon me, using the stealth of assassins, hiding your faces behind masks—"

"Only a leaf from your own book, Miss Prendergree! There is a reason why we should hide our faces, just such, perhaps, as has prompted you to hide yours."

"But, come. Let us not quarrel. Will you go with us quietly, or shall we be compelled to bind and gag you?"

"You are three to one, but I shall resist to the last!" was the determined response, and then from the folds of her dress the beautiful girl drew and leveled a short, gold-mounted revolver.

Visibly surprised at this unexpected resistance, the outlaw nimbly sprang aside, just as the weapon exploded, and the ball intended for his heart found its billet in the brawny chest of the man behind him.

"Curses! Hurry, boys—we must take her at all hazards!" and with that sharply-uttered command the leader flung himself forward, grasping the wrist of the girl and forcing her pistol hand upward.

Then the second ruffian leaped to his assistance, and in another minute Adah was helplessly within their power—bound and gagged.

"The spitfire! She's given poor Curly his last sickness!" the leader exclaimed, after a hasty examination of the fallen outlaw. "We must leave him here—he's too hard hit to be moved."

Hastily stripping the dying ruffian of everything of value, the two men at once quitted the house, half-carrying, half-dragging their plucky, but helpless captive.

Arrived at the stables, they found the horses ready, and in a moment the party were all mounted, and pushing slowly and cautiously along the mountain-side, above the camp. Just below the falls of Old Hat Creek they descended to the valley, forded the stream, and struck into the Wagon Gap trail.

"Now, boys, forward at full speed while the trail is good, for we've got to take the long road this night," the leader ordered, striking spurs to his horse. "If those meddlesome fools at the blind canyon halt us, throw a few shots at them and ride like the wind."

A hoarse note of assent came from the two fellows in the rear, and then all became silent, save the steady beat of the horses over that rough and stony trail.

Contrary to expectations, and to the hopes raised in the breast of the captive, no challenge came from out the shadows of the blind canyon, however, and the little cavalcade swept onward unmolested.

For something more than five miles the route lay with the trail, then turned abruptly to the northward, through the jaws of an intersecting canyon, where the intense gloom compelled a reduction of speed.

Then, after a half hour of that slow and laborious riding, the course of the canyon suddenly changed, running almost due northwest, so that the moonlight partially dispelled the darkness, and the party again set forward at a gallop.

But to accurately describe the devious windings of the outlaws in their flight is not essential. Let it suffice that an hour before midnight the party drew rein upon the verge of a bold cliff, far up in the mountains. At their feet lay a canyon, narrow, but deep and dark, and out from the depths of which came the monotonous swirl and rush of a mountain torrent; beyond the canyon rose a wall of cold gray rock to a height of a hundred feet.

Ordering the two men to fall back with the captive, the leader dismounted, and with his hands curved around his mouth uttered the hail:

"Hallo! hallo!"

Instantly the rocks and crags took up the cry, and hurled it back in a hundred answering echoes. "Then a portion of the opposite wall gave way, and in the aperture thus created a man appeared, lantern in hand.

"Hallo! hallo! Who comes?" he cried.

In a low voice came the reply:

"A subject of the Queen."

"On what errand?"

"Bearing a captive of the god of war."

"It is well. You may advance."

Then the fellow disappeared, and the

next minute a slender steel bridge was projected across the chasm.

"Forward, boys. Dismount and hold the horses until I return," the leader ordered, and, taking the captive in his powerful arms, he boldly stepped upon the bridge, to disappear a moment later within the aperture.

Stout-hearted as Adah Prendergree had proved herself to be, she shuddered as her eyes encountered the inky blackness of that fearful chasm, and it was with a breath of intense relief that she felt the cold rocks of the cavern beneath her feet.

"Close the bridge after me, then conduct the lady straight to the captive's cell," the outlaw requested, with the air of one accustomed to command, and then he turned and hurriedly retraced his steps to his waiting followers.

"Mount, boys, and let's away!" he exclaimed. "We must be tucked snugly in our little beds when the storm breaks to-morrow."

Then the bridge disappeared, and the aperture in the cliff closed, and all was again grim and silent.

Removing the gag from the captive's mouth, the sentry threw a soft woollen cloth over her head, effectually preventing the use of her eyes.

"Come, let us go," he said, not unkindly, and taking her by the arm, he led the way up a steep flight of steps and out of the cavern.

Then came a short walk, followed by a halt and an exchange of countersigns. A door opened and closed, and the girl instantly divined that she had entered a building of some kind.

"We are almost there, lady, and you will not find yourself alone," said the sentry, as he removed the cloth from her head and severed the thongs holding her wrists. "You are now in the mountain stronghold of Prince Mars, and but one of many captives."

With that the fellow unlocked a door and gently forced her into a long, low room. Then the door clanged loudly, the key grated in the lock, and Adah Prendergree was alone with her companions in misery.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A SERIES OF SURPRISES.

A mighty shout, gradually swelling and deepening into an ominous roar, greeted the fall of Gambler Ince, and a glance upstream disclosed the initial move of a bold plot for revenge.

A narrow footbridge across the creek was alive with the denizens of Occident, rushing into Orient with loud threats of vengeance against Faro Dick.

But the two sports stood unmoved and utterly fearless, narrowly watching Jared Prendergree as he moved rapidly toward the fallen gambler.

Then, out from the shadows of a large building on the Orient side moved a body of twenty picked men, armed with repeating rifles and revolvers, and led by the redoubtable marshal, old Bolly Dorrit.

Deploying rapidly into the open space upon the creek bank, this force came to a halt, and, with leveled rifles, grimly confronted the oncoming host.

"Stop! or we'll stop you!" the veteran shouted, his usually wheezy voice rising clear and distinct above the din. "Advance one step more, and we'll shoot you down like dogs!"

Most salutary was that harsh challenge, emphasized as it was by that bristling array of deadly muzzles, and to a man the mob paused, then shrank back and at a low-spoken word of command slowly retreated.

And small wonder, for at that close and deadly range not one ball in ten would go astray when fired by the cool, deliberate men composing the marshal's posse.

This move of the marshal, although wholly unexpected, did not escape the keen eyes of Cool Creede and the White Sport, and as the mob fell back they again turned their undivided attention to Prendergree and Ince.

"Is your man satisfied?" Cool Creede demanded, after a moment, as Prendergree slowly arose from beside his friend.

"Satisfied!" the mine-manager ejaculated, drawing his hand sharply across his eyes. "Gentlemen, he will eat nor drink never again. He has fired his last shot—turned his last card. He is dead!"

Prendergree's heavy voice was tremulous with emotion.

"And you," persisted Creede, with merciless coldness. "Are you satisfied, or do you wish to continue the affair?"

"No, no! 'Let the dead past bury its dead!'" was the solemn response, and, stooping, Prendergree raised the body of the gambler in his arms and walked rapidly back to camp.

Turning to his friend, the White Sport laughed lightly.

"The infernal old fraud!" he exclaimed. "Ichabod Ince is no more dead than you or I, Creede!"

"Sure?"

"I am positive. His right arm is badly shattered at the elbow, but he is not dead, unless killed by fright."

"And yet—"

The brows of the White Sport contracted sharply at that half-earnest, half-jesting murmur of reproof, and then his blue-gray eyes frankly met the questioning gaze of his fellow-sport.

"Maybe I ought to have done it, Creede," he admitted, with an apologetic air. "They're not given to showing mercy on their side. But I felt that I just couldn't do it while he was so completely at my mercy, and I could so simply put him out of the way of taking a hand in the fight till the worst is over."

"It is as well so—perhaps better," Cool Creede averred, warmly grasping the hand extended to him. "In any event, it does credit to your heart, whatever may be said of your judgment."

Then Faro Dick picked up his scrape and hat, and the two sports at once joined Dorrit's forces.

At the same moment a man, a tall, ungainly fellow rapidly approached from the opposite direction. That he was the bearer of important news was painfully evident. His clothing hung in shreds and his face was ghastly in its intense pallor. Across his forehead extended an ugly wound, the blood from which blurred and half-blinded his savagely-gleaming eyes.

And this man, known as Long Jim Pike, was the keeper of the calaboose.

"They've gone an' did et—deuce rot 'em ter billy blue blazes!" he yelled, in an excited manner, with a furious flourish of his fists, as soon as he had gotten within a dozen yards of the marshal and his posse. "An' I done said as how they would, when you all wouldn't believe et, an' now ther critters gone!"

Then came an outburst of the fellow's peculiar profanity, and in another minute his lanky form was wriggling and twisting in the hands of the marshal and two of his men.

"Gone? What—where, Jim? Not the Deserter Chief?" Dorrit demanded, roughly shaking the fellow to bring him to his senses.

"Jest that!" with a vicious snarl, as he lightly threw off the restraining hands. "Cuss et, yas! Cain't—"

But the remainder of that snapping, half-articulate sentence was lost, for, flinging Long Jim aside, Dorrit darted forward, closely followed by his men.

It was no great distance to the calaboose—a stoutly-built log structure of two rooms standing closely under the foot of the mountain, and within three minutes the officer and his posse had forced their way through the crowd and surrounded the rude prison.

But Long Jim Pike had spoken the truth. The doors stood ajar—the bird had flown!

By what means that bold rescue had been effected, the half-crazed keeper was as yet totally unable to explain, and with a growl of disgust Dorrit turned to the two sports.

But before a single word could pass his heavily bearded lips, a dull crash came from further up the winding street, to be quickly followed by a sharp fusilade of revolver shots.

"Trouble at the Ace of Spades!" the

White Sport tersely exclaimed. "Come, boys! Fairfax is in danger!"

Then the real mission of the men from Occident became manifest. With a hoarse, triumphant shout, they boldly and deliberately obstructed the way, until, exasperated beyond further endurance, Dorrit gave the order to fire.

In response the heavy crash of twenty rifles rang out, and over the heads of the crowd hurtled a volley of bullets—a significant reminder of what might be expected should that dastardly interference continue.

The hint was sufficient. Breaking right and left, the crowd hurried toward the creek, leaving the street fairly clear before the determined marshal and his brave followers.

But that delay, brief as it had been, gave ample time for the Deserter Chief and his men to win clear of the Ace of Spades, and when Dorrit and his followers surged through the huge opening torn in the front wall by a charge of dynamite, it was only to find the gambling-hall deserted.

Fairfax and the nine prisoners were gone, but on the floor were the severed bonds of the latter, proving conclusively that they had been rescued. The stock of revolvers and knives upon the faro layout had been distributed among the released captives, while the bodies of McMurree and Silver Sam were missing.

"It's a clean sweep!" Dorrit gritted, between his clinched teeth. "Scatter, boys, and if you sight the gang, shoot to kill, for this night's work is only begun."

"They've not gone far," Cool Creede remarked, significantly. "Allow me to suggest, Dorrit, that you send the whole force out the back way and up into the Orient mine."

The marshal started.

"You think—"

"That will be the next move!" was the crisp interruption. "They will attempt to jump the mine."

"And so say I," the White Sport exclaimed. "You lead the boys, Bolly, and Creede and I will follow as soon as we learn Fairfax's fate."

Nodding a curt assent, the marshal uttered a rallying cry, and then, as his men came trooping up, led the way into the hotel, out the back way, and along the foot of the mountain to the entrance to the mine.

"You'd better send over to the camp, Creede, for the rest of your force," Faro Dick suggested. "Let them make their headquarters at the hotel until the attack comes, and then we can catch the devils between two fires if need be."

Stepping to that huge hole in the wrecked front of the building, Cool Creede uttered a shrill signal call, and in a moment six men had left the crowd and silently hurried to his side.

Tersely explaining the situation, he sent five of them into the hotel, while the sixth at once secured his horse and started back to the camp in the blind canyon.

"Come—let us look up Fairfax or some of the guards," Creede exclaimed, as he rejoined the White Sport. "I am more than puzzled at the rancher's absence, unless he is a captive."

"It's a safe bet he's just that," was the quick response. "It is just in line with the play Prendergree and his crew are making."

Passing through the archway into the hotel bar-room, the two friends quickly succeeded in finding a number of the guards, all wounded or more or less used up, either by the explosion or in the short, fierce conflict immediately following. But not one had seen Fairfax after the appearance of the outlaw cohort, and the fate of the rancher seemed destined, for the time at least to remain a sealed mystery.

While these inquiries were going on a new movement was afoot outside—a movement fated deeply to affect the whole future of Prickly Pear Camp.

A single rifle shot rang out, closely followed by a burst of yells, and as Cool Creede caught the White Sport's eye he quietly exclaimed:

"It is a signal! They are jumping the Orient Mine!"

CHAPTER XXX.

JUMPING THE MINE.

Yes, with that rifle shot the whole import of much that was past and gone became clearly and indelibly fixed upon the minds of the two sports. All that had been puzzling and mysterious in the daily reports of their paid spies in Occident now stood forth in the bold relief of actuality, and they knew that the sole stake being played for that night was possession of the Orient mine.

"We never 'opped to that game a breath too quick!" uttered the White Sport, a peculiar smile curling his closely-shaven lips.

"Dorrit and his men have barely had time to get inside," Cool Creede returned.

Then the two walked back through the hotel and out into the crowd, whence, in the brilliant moonlight, a good view of the mine and its approaches was to be had.

The entrance to the mine lay some three hundred yards to the northward, and was enclosed by a high stockade. Within this enclosure were several buildings, two of which were nightly occupied by the guard of eight men who looked after the property.

So great had been the turmoil in Orient since the setting of the sun that none of these men had yet retired for the night, and thus it fortunately happened that Dorrit and his men had not lost a minute in gaining the interior of the stockade.

The superintendent, Israel Goodman, had been the first to discover the approach of the marshal at the head of his party, and he instantly jumped to the correct conclusion—namely, that it was an additional force sent to help guard the mine against claim jumpers.

And so he was at the stockade gate in person when Dorrit arrived, and he it was who closed the gate and secured the locks when the last man had filed through.

"It looks like a bad night, Bolly," he remarked, turning to the veteran. "A 'jump,' eh?"

"A try that way is very likely, they say," responded the detective, who was peering through the crevices in the gate and on down the broken slope. "But look yonder, Israel, and tell me what you see."

"They're massing there, in the shadow of that timber clump," the superintendent announced, after a moment. "And it looks suspiciously like they were getting ready to move on to the mine."

The accuracy of Goodman's judgment was demonstrated in less than a minute. Moving silently out from the shadows, the assailants, nearly a hundred in number, started up the slope in a solid body.

"They must be held at a safe distance," warned Dorrit. "Keep them all of a hundred yards away, for they are armed with dynamite, and a single charge would knock a hole in the stockade big enough to admit the whole army."

Goodman nodded a smiling assent, then uttered a signal calling his men to their posts, rifle in hand. The stockade was a stout one, plentifully provided with loopholes, and with the force now at his command the superintendent felt no fear of defeat.

The attacking party moved steadily forward until half the distance between the timber clump and the stockade had been covered, then halted, and a rifle shot rang out, followed by a burst of yells.

"That was a signal gun!" Dorrit exclaimed. "They are advancing in two or more divisions."

True enough, for at that moment a sentry came running in from the northeast angle of the wall, with the information that a body of men at least fifty strong were advancing from the north along the mountain side.

"The fellows mean business, and no mistake," Goodman muttered, for the first time showing signs of doubt and indecision.

"I'll take a bunch of the men over there and stand them off," Dorrit suggested, encouragingly. "That will leave you with only the force in front to look after. And I reckon the sooner they're stopped now the better."

Without awaiting an answer, the mar-

shal hastily selected five men from his own force and darted off to the threatened point, with the men at his heels.

That move, executed so quickly and adroitly, rallied Goodman from his momentary indecision, and he at once sprang to the wicket in the stockade gate.

A glance down the slope showed him that the attacking force was again advancing, and at a rapid pace.

"Halt, there! Halt, or we fire!" he shouted, in stentorian tones.

That hail had the desired effect. To a man the approaching army halted, and there was a hurried consultation among the leaders.

Then a man bearing a white handkerchief tied to the barrel of his rifle stepped forward and slowly advanced to within twenty paces of the stockade gate.

"That will do," warned Goodman, grimly. "You are close enough. Say your little piece, and then get back as quickly as the good Lord will let you."

"You are mighty bold, my fine fellow," the envoy retorted, with a sneer. "Do you command the forces guarding this mine?"

"You've hit it, stranger, first pop!"

"Very good, then. Listen to what I have to say, and it will save you trouble."

"I am here, in the name of the law, to demand immediate possession of this property!"

The fellow spoke in a tone of swelling arrogance that nettled the gruff old superintendent.

"Oh, you are, are you?" he retorted, his gray mustaches bristling sarcastically. "It's a heap to do with the law you want, you blasted highway robber! Y-a-as, I reckon! Dead in love with the law, ain't you, now?"

"But since you're headed that way, I don't mind telling you that possession is about nine points high in that little game. And that's the trump we hold!"

"Do you savvy?"

The envoy uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"You'll have to come out of that," he warned, shaking his long forefinger menacingly. "Under the law you have not a foot to stand upon, and if you persist in this foolishness your life and the lives of the men with you shall pay the forfeit!"

"Be it known, we hold the original deeds to this land, and in addition thereto a full release of all interest in this and adjoining claims, duly signed by Duke and Basil Drumm!"

"That is the case in a nutshell, and again I warn you not to resist!"

For a moment Israel Goodman was nonplussed. Then a hand was laid lightly upon his arm, and he turned around, to stand face to face with the White Sport.

"You here?"

"Yes; I came through the secret entrance, and it is fortunate that I did, for that fellow is putting up what might be made a strong case," Faro Dick replied.

"Indeed he is, boss," the superintendent declared, with a wise shake of his gray head. "I tell you, he had me puzzled."

"And small wonder! But stand aside, Goodman, and let me talk to him."

Glad to be relieved of the responsibility, Israel Goodman quickly obeyed.

Then the sport stepped to the wicket.

"Hallo, there!" he hailed.

"Hallo!" was the quick response.

"Do I understand you to say you hold the original deed to this land?"

"That was what I said."

"And that, in addition to that, you hold a full release of the mine, signed by Duke and Basil Drumm?"

"Exactly!"

"Very good! Now, how much of that is true?"

"It is all true, as you will speedily find to your cost!" and the envoy assumed a blustering, defiant air.

"If your statements are true, why don't you proceed in orthodox fashion and make legal service upon us?" pursued the sport, seemingly desirous of protracting that conference to the utmost limit. "If that failed to oust us, then public sympathy might be with you if you attempted to jump the mine."

"We have no time for the law's delays," was the impatient response. "The property is ours—"

"Oh, no, it is not! You are very much mistaken in that particular, at least, Mr. Kent Keene," Faro Dick interrupted, in an incisive manner. "And it is only fair to add that every claim you have set up is absolutely false!"

"You hold no deed to the land, and I can assure you that your release for the mine is either purely imaginary or a forgery!"

"Those are the plain facts in the matter, and I advise you to get back to your friends without the loss of a minute!"

There was a threatening ring in the stern voice of the sport that boded ill to the outlaw envoy, and with a muttered curse he turned and strode back to his lines.

"That was about as bold a game as I ever saw played," Faro Dick remarked, laughing shortly, as he turned to Goodman. "They will attack us now, and we must see that the men make every shot count."

"They can be depended upon, sir," the superintendent returned. "I know every man of them, and a better crowd couldn't be picked up in a month's travel."

Then a loud burst of yells announced that the sport's prediction was to be speedily verified. Spreading out in the form of a huge crescent, the outlaws charged boldly up the slope, discharging their weapons at the stockade.

But the men behind that stout wooden wall were not to be dismayed or thrown into a panic. From each loophole came a burst of flame, and a heavy volley rang out, time after time, from the repeating-rifles in the hands of the defenders.

Before that deadly rain of lead no body of men could stand, and with wild yells of dismay the outlaw horde broke and fled to cover.

The attack had failed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BOLD STROKE.

Let us return briefly to the corral in the rear of the American Hotel, and learn what passed between Cool Creede and the White Sport during the moment they stood watching for the advance of the outlaws against the Orient mine.

Both were outwardly calm and collected, although each felt that a bitter struggle, involving life and fortune, lay just ahead.

"It seems to me, Dick," observed Creede, as he noted the advance of the outlaw envoy with critical eye, "that it is high time we began a retaliatory movement against the good citizens of Occident."

"They have been rubbing it in rather severely in the past four-and-twenty hours, and if we don't do something pretty soon they'll jump to the conclusion that they're running both camps."

"There is danger of that," the White Sport assented, smiling grimly. "But what is it you have in mind, Creede?"

"I was thinking of adopting a feature of their programme and jumping a mine," was the cool reply.

"Not the Occident?"

"Nothing else. You know, we figured on that trick a year ago, as it seemed all other means would fail, but the odds were so heavily against us that we at that time gave it up."

"That is true."

"Well, things have changed, and tonight the fates seem to favor us. Nine out of every ten of the denizens of that camp are more or less interested in the attack on the Orient, and the chances are that the Occident is but poorly guarded. I think that with Deerfoot's men the trick can be worked."

"It certainly looks feasible," admitted Faro Dick. "That is, if you can get the men out of Orient and into Occident without being discovered."

"Oh, that part of it is easy enough," Cool Creede assured. "By every law of right and justice the one-half interest in the mine is ours, while Prendergree and

his crowd have not the shadow of a claim to the other half."

"You slip up there and look after the defense of the Orient, and I will attend to the Occident at once."

Then the two men parted company, Faro Dick going up the mountain-side and entering the stockade by the secret way, as we have seen, while Cool Creede hurried into the bar-room of the hotel to await the arrival of the remainder of Deerfoot's force.

That the bold move he had determined upon was fraught with deadly danger troubled the cool sport but little. With all his seeming carelessness he had calculated the chances for and against him to a nicety, and was well satisfied with the prospect.

Deerfoot and his men were not long in making their appearance, as the heavy firing at the mine had apprised them of trouble and hastened their steps.

While the men were taking the horses to the corral, Creede quietly drew the young plainsman aside and explained the contemplated move.

"We're in for the war, cap," was the ready response. "Lay down your plan, and I'll see that the boys follow it to the letter."

So, in a few terse sentences, Cool Creede gave the necessary instructions, and Deerfoot expressed hearty approval of the course decided upon.

Barring accident, we can hardly fail to win," he declared. "You lead off, and I'll get the boys out of camp without a soul being the wiser for the move. The racket here will cover any noise we may make, and the chances are we'll catch the guards napping."

Then the sport took his departure, rifle in hand, and leisurely strode out of camp in the direction of Wagon Gap trail.

At the point where the trail bent to the eastward and entered the stream he abruptly turned toward the creek and sought the shelter of a clump of undergrowth.

Here he patiently waited until joined by two of the men, when the three forded the stream and sat down in the shadows.

The others of the force were not long in coming. They approached from the direction of the camp by twos, all fully armed, and each man carrying his lariat.

Deerfoot brought up the rear.

"We're in luck, cap, or I miss my guess," the chief declared. "The camp is wild with excitement, and every place has closed. So we made a clean run of it, with never a question asked."

"Oh, the fickle goddess of fortune is smiling upon us," returned the sport. "But a number of horses have crossed the creek at this point within the last few hours, Deerfoot, and I would suggest that we move forward at once, as the fellows are likely to return at any moment. Once let them get an inkling of our presence on this side of the stream, and we'll have only our pains for our trouble."

"That's true as Gospel," one of the men averred. "But I noticed how their trail led off in their Gap, over yon, an' if they're gone through they'll not get back afore day, I reckon."

The trail in question was that made by the abductors of Adah Prendergree in their flight.

Dismissing the matter as unimportant, Cool Creede rapidly led the way up the mountain-side to the terrace on which was situated the home of Prendergree, and halted the party at a point directly above the mine.

Like the Orient, the Occident was protected by a stout stockade, some eight or nine feet high, and as the invaders gazed down from the edge of the terrace every movement of the guards within the inclosure was distinctly visible.

After a brief survey of the scene, the sport and Deerfoot carefully selected the course for the descent, and in Indian file the entire party crept down to the rear of the stockade.

Picking a shadowy angle of the wall for the point of attack, another halt was made, and then, after a moment's rest, a number of the lariats were quickly formed into a rope ladder.

That done, the sport mounted to the shoulders of two of the men, and carefully scanned the interior of the stockade.

Not a guard was near.

All were at the lower gate, busily discussing the attack upon the rival camp.

Then one end of the improvised ladder was thrown over, and the sport at once descended and made it fast. A sharp jerk signaled that all was ready, and within three minutes the entire party were inside the stockade.

"So far, so good!" the sport exclaimed, with a jubilant mien. "Now, boys, look to your weapons, and we'll beard the lion in his den. Don't shoot till you have to; but if it comes to that, make every shot tell."

"Remember that in this move we are wronging no man, but simply wresting from an organized gang of law-breakers that which never belonged to them, to restore it to its rightful owners."

"Right you is, pard," came the ready response from the nearest of the men, and then two abreast the party passed silently around the corner of the building and out into the open, Cool Creede and Deerfoot leading the way.

Straight across the inclosure they marched, boldly, yet so silently that their presence was not detected until they were within less than a dozen paces of the guards at the gate. Then—

"Holy Moses! Pards, we're in fer et now!"

"We war' talkin' jumpin', an' now we're jumped ourselves fer sure!"

"Right you are, my man!" Cool Creede sternly cried. "Throw up your hands and surrender, every man of you, for in the name of Duke and Basil Drumm, heirs-at-law of Duval Kingsley, I take possession of this mine!"

Resistance was useless, for they were outnumbered nearly three to one, and with exclamations of disgust the five guards quietly yielded.

And thus, without the firing of a shot, a deadly blow was dealt to the Mormon cohort.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DEMON HORSEMAN.

"By Heavens! If I mistake not, that man is my friend of the years long gone—Major Benson Lee!"

"Yes, he it is, although greatly changed, and he is a prisoner in the hands of those three outlaws."

"Since learning that he was located in this territory, I have often thought to seek him out, explain all, and renew the friendship of the past if it be possible, for we are both growing old and should not go down to the grave enemies."

"Well, the way is open now, and my duty clear, for I must rescue him."

These words fell from the lips of a man reclining, field-glass in hand, on the flat top of a huge rock on the mountain-side not far from the eastern end of Death Canyon.

He was near three-score, tall, and of spare build, with closely-cropped gray hair and smooth-shaven face. His clothing was of some stout, black stuff, and fitted him snugly, while in the belt at his middle were a brace of heavy revolvers and a knife.

It was late in the afternoon of the day witnessing that meeting between Rosa Lee and Kent Keene, when Cool Creede had so opportunely appeared. The sun was near the western horizon, and the shadows were steadily creeping up the sides of that deep and narrow valley.

Closely following the movements of the outlaw trio with his powerful glass, the old man lay quite still until he saw them halt and go into camp something like a mile up the valley.

"They intend to remain there to-night," he muttered, as he noted the preparations being made. "But when they awake, if that thing ever occurs, it must be to find the prisoner gone."

The fitful glow in his dark eyes lent a peculiar significance to his words.

Then the sun sank yet lower, the shadows deepened more rapidly, and twilight

shut out all save the glimmer of the distant camp-fire.

A deep sigh burst from the thin lips of the old mountain hermit, and he slowly rose and put up his glass, descended from the rock to the valley, and disappeared in the gathering darkness.

Meanwhile, at the camp, one of the outlaws had engaged himself in preparations for supper, for from one of the pack-saddles he had taken a kit of camp utensils and other articles, and soon the odor of bacon and coffee rose on the sweet mountain air.

His companions had thrown themselves down at the foot of a tree, and were smoking and talking to the prisoner, who was indeed none other than the valley rancher, Major Benson Lee.

That which the men had told him seemed to surprise the old officer, for he stroked his long white beard reflectively and looked from one to the other, as though he would read their very thoughts.

"So you were hired to waylay and kill me?" he exclaimed, after a moment's silence.

"Jest that very thing, major," assured the nearer of the ruffians, with easy familiarity.

"Yas, indeedy!" chimed in the second, complacently. "We war' told ter lay fer yer in Death Canyon ter-day, an' so we did. An' I reckon ef pard, hyar, hedn't 'a' hed a soft spot in his tough ole heart fer ye, ye'r toes 'u'd be tamed up ter ther sod 'bout now."

"But who hired you? That is the question that puzzles me," the major persisted. "I have but few enemies that I can call to mind."

The two outlaws shook their heads.

"Thet, major, is somethin' we cain't tell yer," the leader declared. "Et would cost us our lives ter let et be known."

"But we hev' voted ter spare ye'r life on condition thet yer will agree ter leave this hyar part o' ther kentry forever es soon es we tarns yer loose."

"That is a bitter alternative, my friends," the major returned. "All that I have is here, and when I leave it I am a ruined man."

"But et is ther best I kin do, pard, an' but fer ther sake o' ther ole Mexican campaign an' ther fact thet yer once saved my life, I c'u'dn't offer even that," the outlaw urged, earnestly. "An' et thet, ef et ever leaks out thet yer escaped, I'm a goner."

Major Lee shook his head sadly.

"I am sorry you have come to this, Hawkins," he exclaimed. "You have indeed fallen!"

"Yas, I reckon I has, pard Major, but et war' a lucky fall fer yer, fer ef some one else hed stood in my place ter-day, yer'd not be kickin' now," was the ready response.

"But think et all over, pard, by mornin', an' then ye kin tell us what yer intends ter do, fer ye'r word is ye'r bond, an' we'll take et every time."

Then the third outlaw announced that supper was ready, and the four men fell to with a relish, the major being too old a campaigner to permit anything in the nature of his present difficulty to impair his appetite.

The meal finished, the camp chores were duly attended to, and the security of the captive assured by additional bonds. Then the outlaws spread their blankets, lay down, smoked, and fell asleep.

But Major Lee's eyes did not close.

He felt that his home and his daughter were in danger, and he bent every thought, every energy, to an attempt to escape.

The bonds confining him had been applied and knotted by experienced hands, as he learned when he attempted to slip them, for they did not yield one iota, although he tugged at them until his wrists were swollen and bleeding.

Then the fire attracted his attention, and with his closely-pinioned feet he attempted to draw one of the smoldering brands toward him. But it was just beyond his reach, and with a smothered groan he gave up the attempt, turned upon his side and closed his eyes in thought.

How long he remained thus he never knew.

A slight noise in the adjacent undergrowth caused him to open his eyes with a start and peer sharply in the direction whence it came.

The moon had now crossed the zenith of its course, and was beginning to sink in the western heavens. The open spots of the valley were yet aflame with its yellow light, but in the dense undergrowth the shadows of night hung like a sable pall.

And out of this blackness and gloom, like a grotesque wreath of pale blue flame, rose a skeleton form to greet the startled gaze of the captive.

Like a flash the truth came to him.

It was the Demon Rider, afoot!

Then hope again leaped high in his breast. Terrible as was that shape, he knew that it was of human agency, and there to befriend him.

Silently the figure glided forward until it had reached his side. Then it stooped, and a keen knife parted the stout thongs pinioning the captive.

"Arise, and remain quiet," the unknown ordered, in a husky whisper.

Major Lee mutely obeyed.

Toward the sleeping outlaws glided the ghastly rescuer, knife in hand. Then the horses, affrighted at that unearthly figure, snorted loudly, snapped the picket-ropes, and dashed away.

Aroused by the tumult, the nearest of the outlaws, the leader, sprang to his feet. At sight of the unearthly-looking rescuer, a piercing yell of terror burst from his throat.

It was the last sound he was ever to utter. A long knife gleamed wickedly in the moonlight, then sank to the hilt through his heart.

Alarmed, the others hastily scrambled up, and, despite the terror of the moment, sent shot after shot at that strange intruder ere taking to their heels and vanishing in the depths of the timber.

Reeling blindly for a moment, the rescuer staggered backward and went down in a heap across the body of Major Lee, who had also fallen before that furious fusillade.

"My God! I am hard hit!"

"Am I to die thus, like a stricken dog, with my mission unfinished?"

"No, no! I will live—I will defy my foes to the bitter end!"

Brokenly at first, then harshly, fell those words from the lips of the mysterious masquerader, and he weakly staggered to his feet, pressing his hands hard against his chest.

For a moment it seemed that he would fall again, then strength returned and he was quickly himself once more.

"It was a narrow shave, and I am hard hit, but worth a dozen dead men yet," he muttered, as he moved forward and stooped over the dead outlaw. "Poor devil! he has paid the full penalty for his many crimes, but he was a captain of the accursed League, and so deserved to die."

While speaking the unknown had deftly ripped open the shirt of the outlaw, disclosing upon his broad chest the lock of gold suspended by a chain of silver.

"Thrice accursed emblem! It is burned upon my brain in lines of fire!" he gritted, staring moodily at that bauble shimmering so softly in the bright moonlight. "It is the fatal heritage handed down from father to daughter, and it has ruined my life, even as it came near to wrecking that of Benson Lee!"

Then, abruptly turning, he knelt and closely examined the fallen officer.

"Not dead, but badly hurt, or I miss my guess," he muttered, running his finger gently along an ugly furrow cut in the major's skull by one of the heavy bullets. "I had hoped to avoid it, but now he must go to the retreat with me, for there alone can he have proper care after this night's red work."

And, calling up his horse, the strange man raised Major Lee in his strong arms, placed him across the saddle, mounted, and rode down the valley toward Death Canyon.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PADLOCK AND CHAIN.

Day had dawned again ere Major Benson Lee returned to consciousness, to find himself upon a soft couch of dried skins in a snug underground retreat.

A bandage, wet with cold water, was bound tightly about his head, and his temples ached and throbbed painfully.

Mechanically his eyes swept his grim surroundings, and then his gaze centered upon the dim, indistinct form seated upon a block of wood beside him.

"Where am I?" he asked, his voice sounding strangely weak and hollow in that gloomy cavern.

The figure beside him started, as if awakened from a painful reverie, and slowly replied:

"You are in the secret home of Justin Fairfax, Benson Lee."

"Aha!" the major exclaimed, abruptly sitting up, while his sunken eyes flashed fiercely. "And you?"

"I am Justin Fairfax."

With a choking cry of anger the old officer sprang half-erect, then sank back, weak and trembling, yet fairly quivering with bitter resentment.

"And you dare—"

"Peace, man! You are wounded, and I am dying," was the quiet, but firm-voiced interruption. "It is not the hour for quarreling, but for explanations too long delayed."

"Explanations?"

"So I said, Benson Lee."

"You have wronged me most bitterly, Justin Fairfax!"

"And saved you and wrecked my own life in doing so, Benson Lee, for your faithless bride was none other than Annette, the daughter of Andreas, the accursed sea rover."

Again the major sat up, and the look of horror upon his face was such that no pen could picture it.

"Impossible!" he cried.

But Justin Fairfax shook his head sadly and declared:

"No, my old-time friend, it is the truth itself, though bitter and black as death. You know the story of Andreas—that he was a Spanish sea captain condemned to death for treason, and chained by the neck with links of steel to the walls of his dungeon; that he escaped, put to sea as a pirate, and through all his bloody career bore upon his neck that circlet of steel as an omen of fortune."

"Yes, yes! I have heard the story, Justin Fairfax," Major Lee exclaimed, wiping his dripping brow. "But I see not where it applies to the woman I loved."

"She was good, she was pure and beautiful, in my eyes, till the day you wrested her from me at the very altar, when love turned to hate, cruel and bitter."

"Wait!" was the harsh-voiced response. "There is proof—proof strong and most damning!"

"You will recall that Andreas, the rover, gathered about him a fleet of many vessels, the captains of which were each compelled to wear about his neck a silver chain, secured with a golden padlock. This token was to serve a two-fold purpose; first, it positively identified the wearer as a follower of Andreas, so that he might not hope for mercy if captured, and thus ever urged him to fight to the death. Then, too, it was the emblem upon which even the lowest of the pirate's followers were compelled to take their oath of allegiance, and thus was each captain's badge of authority, exacting complete obedience."

"At the height of his career, Andreas ran boldly into the Spanish coast, sacked the plantation of a dignitary high in the councils of the nation, and bore away captive the daughter of the house, who reports said was a most beautiful maiden."

"Forcing this girl into marriage, the rover placed upon her neck the emblem of piratical authority, forged out of gold and set with precious stones, and caused her to be crowned as queen of the sea bandits."

"Near a secluded inlet of the Virginia coast the pirate had purchased a splendid plantation, and he made it his home be-

tween cruises, and there, after several years had passed, a daughter was born to the queen."

"And that child, Benson Lee, grew into the beautiful girl whom you knew as Isabel Ramon. She had inherited her mother's fatal beauty, and with it her father's cruel and vindictive nature."

"She deserted you the day set for your marriage, and fled with me, but she had deceived us both, for she had a living husband, having secretly wedded a young coast smuggler many months before."

"Disaster had at last come upon her father, the pirate chief; her mother was dead, the plantation heavily mortgaged, and it was for gold she played. The Lees were not wealthy, the Fairfaxes were, and it was this fact which had decided her choice between us."

"So it was that your early life was embittered, and my career wrecked, for through my friend, Duval Kingsley, I soon learned all, cast off the beautiful siren and came West to live out my life in solitude."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DEATH OF THE MYSTERIOUS RIDER.

Then Major Lee looked up, and, for the first time, his eyes encountered the earnest, wistful gaze of Justin Fairfax.

"I recall the accursed emblem now," he nodded. "The chain of gold with its diamond-studded padlock. Many is the time I have seen it upon the dainty white throat of Isabel Ramon, and wondered at its unique design."

"It descended from mother to daughter," Fairfax explained; "and with it the title of Queen of the Sea Bandits."

"The woman was bad—thoroughly bad. There is twenty years of her life that I know nothing of, save that her hate for the Fairfaxes and Duval Kingsley never slept. Secretly but persistently she warred upon my family and that of Kingsley until ruin came to them."

"Then, fifteen years ago, Kingsley came West to retrieve his fortunes. His only child, a daughter, had been stolen in early infancy, his wife was dead, and grief had left him a mere shadow of his former self. It chanced that we met and renewed our former intimacy, and as a result sought work in the mines together."

"But luck was against us. For ten years we struggled against fate. Others around us found themselves rich, while we delved on, earning barely a living, until fortune led us into these hills, where luck at last seemed to smile upon us."

"We struck a lead rich with the yellow treasure, and for months worked it in secret, bearing away by night the richest of the ore in bags on pack-horses, until we had amassed money enough to make needed improvements and employ help."

"Then, with startling suddenness, we were attacked one night by a party of ruffians. I fell at the first fire, and I have since learned that Kingsley was forced to flee to save his life. Believing me dead, the claim-jumpers dumped me into Old Hat Creek, took possession of our property at the mine, and made themselves at home."

"It was the Occident mine?" the major asked, betraying deep interest in that strange narrative.

"It is now so called," Fairfax averred. "You are doubtless familiar with its history from the time it was wrested from us, and I need not repeat it."

"Let it answer that I was pulled from the stream by a wandering hunter, far below the camp, brought to this cavern and resuscitated."

"But my brain had been injured by that vicious attack, and for many months much of the past was a blank. Then I began to mend, mentally, and decided to take steps to recover the mine."

"As the first step, I employed detectives, the chief of whom was Bolly Dorrit, to enter the camp and learn everything possible concerning the claim-jumpers."

"Their first report was made less than a year ago, and it was of a startling nature. It pointed to the existence of an organized cabal, aided and abetted in secret by the Mormon Church, and ruled

with a rod of iron by a woman none other than Annette, the daughter of Andreas, the rover."

"Certain it was that the captains of the league wore upon their necks the pirate's emblem, while Jared Prendergree was proved to be the smuggler husband of Annette."

"Gold and revenge were the ruling motives of this infamous League. First, the mine was wrested from us, and when Duval Kingsley ventured back with his nephews to reclaim it, he was poisoned to death. Then, two nights ago, one of the bands descended upon the home of my brother Nathan, destroying it, and killing him and his younger son, and bearing away into captivity his daughter."

"Last night your ranch was raided, the house burned and the herders killed. But—"

"My God!" and Major Lee, forgetful of his wound and his weakness, leaped to his feet. "My daughter—"

"Is in safe hands, I think," Fairfax interrupted, in turn. "In any event, she was rescued by one whom in years past I knew to be a man among men—a fearless, brave and gallant youth."

"Thank Heaven!" the officer exclaimed, sinking weakly against the wall. "I had feared the worst."

"But why this demon in the guise of a woman should seek to revenge herself upon me or mine I know not, for never have I wronged her."

A wan smile crossed the thin, old face of Justin Fairfax.

"You wedded a sister of Duval Kingsley," he replied. "Your daughter and Duke and Basil Drumm are the only living heirs of my old pard. Remembering the implacable hatred of Annette, it is easy to believe that these facts would urge her to move against you, especially as it is her earnest desire that her son, who is known hereabouts as Kent Keene, shall marry your daughter."

The major's face expressed both surprise and consternation.

"That infamous scoundrel!" he exclaimed, indignantly. "Why, man—"

"Listen—I must hasten," Fairfax interrupted, his face contracting with pain. "I am dying, Benson—this bullet in my chest is snapping the threads of life, and there is yet much to say."

"My pard, who is called Foxfoot, the Hermit, is now away on an important errand, but will return toward night. He will give you a packet of papers, revealing in detail the facts I have outlined to you, and which will show you that in that black and bitter past I was more sinned against than sinning."

"Remain here for a day or two, until the trouble at Prickly Pear blows over, for I have sent a carefully prepared report, with maps of the surrounding hills showing the exact location of the stronghold of Prince Mars and its approaches to the commandant at the fort, and there will certainly be a battle within the next forty-eight hours."

"It is the last move I shall ever be able to make against Annette and her villainous husband and son, but I shall die the happier for having made it."

"When I am dead Foxfoot will explain the trick by which we have held the superstitious outlaws in check for so long, and will conduct you from this place to the camp."

A severe spasm of coughing followed, and the dark blood trickled slowly from the mouth of the dying man. Then he suddenly rallied, saying:

"Good-by, Benson, old friend! May fortune attend you!"

Major Lee warmly grasped the hand outstretched to him. Then a hoarse rattle sounded in the throat of Fairfax, a smile flitted across his thin, blood-flecked lips, and his head dropped gently forward.

The mysterious rider was dead!

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE HERMIT RETURNS.

For some minutes Major Benson Lee sat quite still, clasping the limp and lifeless hand of his boyhood friend. That he was deeply touched was shown by the

sadness of his face and the tears welling unheeded from his eyes.

"I see it all now," he muttered, the words sounding like a hollow echo in that grim and grisly death-chamber. "She cast me off to lure him on to ruin."

"But when he knew all, his noble heart broke with its weight of grief and dishonor. He cast her aside as utterly unworthy, quit his proud estate, and became a homeless exile."

"And yet her vengeance followed him and his, for he now lies dead—slain by one of her bravoos, while the home and family of his only brother have been destroyed."

"Surely there must come a day of reckoning to such fiends, and I pray Heaven it may not be long delayed."

Then Major Lee put by the hand of the dead wanderer and sank back upon the couch.

He was too ill to rise, his head pained him severely, and after tossing restlessly about for a while, he fell into a troubled sleep.

Many hours had passed when the touch of a cold hand upon his forehead caused him to awake with a start, and he glanced quickly about him.

The body of Justin Fairfax had been removed, and in its stead on that block of wood sat a tall, gaunt, heavily-bearded man, whom the major at once recognized as Foxfoot, the Hermit.

"It is you?" Benson Lee exclaimed, with an expression of pleased surprise as he sat up.

"Yes, major, it is I," the hermit returned, pleasantly. "How is your head feeling?"

"It is far better, since I have slept."

"But what have you done with the body of our friend?"

"I buried him, late in the afternoon. Poor fellow! the fate that I feared overtook him at last, and just when victory was his," and the hermit sighed deeply.

"You kept your secret well, friend Foxfoot, for I have always supposed that you lived alone," remarked the major, pleasantly.

The hermit smiled sadly.

"Fairfax wished his very existence kept secret," he explained. "He has never been himself since the attack upon him at the mine. In fact, he was afflicted with a form of madness, but not to the extent that he could not readily distinguish friends from enemies. He had a mania for haunting the hills at night and way-laying the outlaws."

"In my younger days, before I was driven to seek the seclusion of the mountains, I was an artist, and to protect him as far as possible from attacks by the men he was seeking to destroy, I would nightly transform him and his horse, by means of a luminous paint I had invented, into a skeleton rider and steed."

"And a terror-inspiring spectacle he was, too," the major observed. "I shall never forget my first view of the Demon Horseman."

"His favorite haunts were the dark passes leading from the mountains into the valleys," pursued the hermit, after a moment. "Waiting until the outlaws had appeared, he would burn a powder giving a pale green light, then ride forth as the light faded, and his appearance never failed to strike terror to the hearts of these ignorant and superstitious men."

"Then he carried with him a cloak for the horse and one for himself, so that at will he could make either horse or rider disappear."

"The plan was a most successful one, for by means of it he traced the outlaws to their several strongholds, learned their strength, and mapped the approaches, so that a military advance might be successfully made."

"These plans I have carried to the fort, and now two strong detachments are on their way into the hills to drive out the clans of Prince Mars, root and branch."

"Fairfax had often been fired at of late, but fortunately escaped injury. Last night was to have been his final excursion, and, alas, it was! The fate that I had long dreaded befell him."

Then silence came upon the two men, and for several minutes neither spoke.

Finally the hermit arose and from a recess in the wall took a small, oblong packet.

"After Fairfax had brought you here he wrote a note, stating that he was mortally wounded, and requesting that, in case he died before my return, I should give you these papers," he explained, handing the package to the major.

"He spoke of the papers," Lee briefly replied, and then he placed the package in the pocket of his coat.

After some further conversation of a general nature, the hermit prepared a bowl of strengthening broth for the major, and again dressed his wound.

Then the hermit and his guest retired.

With the first streak of dawn, Foxfoot was astir. A substantial breakfast was prepared and eaten, and just at sunrise both men left the cavern, mounted and rode away.

The route selected was a tortuous one, but within two hours they had entered Death Canyon, not far from the ford, and they at once hastened toward Prickly Pear Camp as rapidly as the feeble condition of Major Lee would permit.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

COOL CREEDE'S BOLD VENTURE.

One of the cabins inside the stockade at the Occident mine was quickly converted into a prison, and within it the five captured guards, all disarmed and securely bound, were confined.

That done, Cool Creede and Deerfoot made a thorough reconnoissance of the other building and the mine; but all proved clear, and it was with no little satisfaction that they took their way back to the men at the gate.

Under orders from the sport, the men were then divided into two watches, the members of which were each assigned to patrolling a certain portion of the stockade.

The sport was determined that the cunning trick he had practiced to obtain possession of the mine should not be played upon him in turn.

These arrangements completed, Creede and Deerfoot talked over matters briefly, and the sport prepared to depart.

"They will not be likely to discover the seizure before the men report for work in the morning," he observed, as he unlocked the stockade gate. "But if the unexpected does happen, you may count on help from Orient."

"We'll stand 'em off, never fear," Deerfoot assured. "The cabins are stocked with grub to withstand a siege, and I reckon pard Prendergree will be a deal older than he is now when he again puts foot through this gate."

Then the two friends shook hands, the gate was closed and locked, and the sport boldly strode down into Occident.

The camp was almost deserted, for nearly the entire force of the Mormon cohort had been summoned to take part in the attack on the Orient mine.

Passing rapidly along the rough street till he came to the footbridge, Creede crossed the stream and made his way to the corral in the rear of the hotel, and thence to the secret entrance to the Orient stockade.

Faro Dick had detected his approach, and met him at the gate. A hasty consultation followed, and then Cool Creede rapidly retraced his steps to the corral.

The bold sport had resolved upon a desperate venture.

Securing his horse, he threw on its trappings, and, lariat in hand, rode out into the street.

His course was to the northward, toward the Wagon Gap trail.

At a rapid pace he rode onward until he had reached the small timber clump wherein he had secreted his horse the night before when trailing Gambler Ince, and here he dismounted and removed and secreted his saddle and bridle.

"Good-by, Star Face!" he muttered, affectionately patting the neck of the splen-

did horse. "If I fail to get back, try to fall into good hands."

Turning away, lariat in hand, the sport quickly crossed the trail, forded the little stream, and entered that narrow break in the bluff through which Gambler Ince had disappeared the night before.

On reaching the cave, he reconnoitered a moment, then entered and ignited a match.

The place was deserted, but a single sweeping glance was sufficient to show that it had long been used as a hiding place for the horses of the band while the members were visiting the stronghold on the mountain top.

In one corner was a rude bunk, but beyond that nothing hinted at human occupancy.

Satisfied with that cursory examination, Cool Creede turned away and a moment later was clambering up the mountain, following as nearly as possible the course taken by Gambler Ince on the preceding day.

The moon was now nearing the zenith, and its bright light made it possible for the sport to follow that tortuous and dangerous course almost as rapidly and as safely as by day.

For upward of an hour he toiled on, and then he suddenly came out upon the brink of the canyon at the point where he had lost Gambler Ince the preceding day.

It was a wild, a majestic scene that spread before him, but the mind of Cool Creede was at that moment occupied with something other than the grandeur of nature.

He scanned the face of the bold cliff rising high above on the opposite side of the canyon, vainly seeking some trace of a break or a crevice in that adamantine wall.

Then he peered over the verge at his feet, but with a like fruitless result.

Up from those gloomy, rock-girt depths came the rush and swirl of a swift, deep torrent, but no sound of human creation.

The cliff beneath his feet was of solid rock, and upon its flinty surface no sign could be traced to prove that the foot of man had ever rested upon it.

"It is to be a waiting game," he muttered, slowly moving back from the verge, lasso in hand.

A careful survey of his surroundings disclosed a niche hard by, from which a free and uninterrupted view of that rocky plateau could be had, and he at once snugly ensconced himself within it, confident that before many hours had passed he would make a discovery worthy of his trouble.

His mind was busy with the events of the past few days, and he soon became oblivious to the flight of time. How long he had remained thus when suddenly recalled from the past to the present, he could never determine; but the moon had sunk well toward the tops of the distant western peaks when a quick footstep greeted his ear and brought him to his feet—alert, wakeful.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

COOL CREEDE'S ROUGH USAGE.

Then the figure of a man hastily crossed the rocky plateau and halted on the verge of the canyon, not a dozen paces distant.

Instantly the fellow curved his hands about his lips and in a ringing voice uttered the hail:

"Hallo! hallo!"

A moment passed, then a section of the opposite wall gave way, and in the opening a man appeared.

"Hallo! hallo! Who comes?" this worthy cried.

Again shielding his mouth and speaking in a more cautious tone, the man on the verge replied:

"A subject of the Queen."

"On what errand?"

"Bringing news from the God of War."

"It is well. You may advance," and the fellow turned and disappeared within that dark and cavernous opening.

Swiftly, with the fierce, resistless bound of a ravenous beast springing upon its

prey, Cool Creede launched himself forward, clubbed revolver in hand.

One terrific downward stroke of the weapon and the messenger fell forward, senseless as a lump of clay.

In another minute he was lying in a heap within the niche, and the sport had taken his place upon the edge of the canyon.

Then the steel bridge shot out across the chasm, until the outer end rested upon the solid rock at the sport's feet.

But Cool Creede did not venture upon it.

Coiled lariat in hand, he stood looking toward the valley off to the west.

In a moment the guard, nettled at the delay, reappeared and stepped upon the bridge.

"Why don't you come, cap?" he growled, surlily.

"Sh!" warned the sport, imitating the voice of the messenger as nearly as possible. "Do you not hear that strange noise?"

Alarmed, the guard peered sharply in the direction indicated.

Then the coils of the lariat shot swiftly across the canyon. The noose settled around the fellow's neck, and with a sharp jerk Cool Creede brought him to his knees on the bridge.

Quickly the sport darted forward and again his clubbed revolver rose and fell, and the guard lay senseless.

Casting off the noose, the sport hastily coiled the lariat, then raised the senseless outlaw in his sinewy arms and carried him back to the niche, where he deposited him beside the unconscious messenger.

With the lariat he then firmly bound the two men, back to back, so that it would be a physical impossibility for either to move.

That done, he cut away a portion of the coat of one and fashioned two gags, which he applied with the skill of an adept.

"There!" he muttered, as he stepped back and coolly surveyed his work. "I don't think either of you will be able to fully realize what has happened for some hours to come. But if you should conclude to wake up—well!"

And laughing lightly he turned to the bridge, and with quick, light steps crossed to the hole in the cliff.

As the sport had suspected, this proved to be nothing more nor less than a natural cavity in the cliff, cunningly hidden by a skillfully painted curtain of heavy canvas.

A glance showed that the bridge worked on rollers running in a steel track, and was heavily weighted at the inner end, to prevent its tipping while being run out or withdrawn.

The cavern was fitted with a rude chair, and a bunk for the sentry, showing that a man was kept on duty there day and night.

Pushing through to the rear of the cave, Cool Creede discovered a flight of rude steps, which he at once ascended, to find himself again in the open air.

That he was now within the lair of Prince Mars, the mountain bandit, he did not doubt, and halting in the shadow of the pines, he carefully surveyed his surroundings, to familiarize himself with the cavern's location, as a speedy retreat was one of the things to be provided for.

After a moment he again set forward, directing his steps toward that massive wall of masonry surrounding the innermost stronghold of the Mormon desperado. As he approached the ponderous gate it slowly swung open, and ere the sport could seek cover a man stepped out.

At sight of the intruder he started sharply and drew his revolver, while from his lips came the challenge:

"Who comes there?"

"A subject of the Queen!" was the cool reply.

"Up with your hands!" and with the swiftness of thought the sport drew and leveled his revolvers, fairly catching the drop on the astounded outlaw, who hastened to obey.

"Now, not a word—not a sound!" Cool

Creede fiercely continued, as he rapidly advanced to the fellow's side.

Then he once more brought his revolver butt into play and as the surprised outlaw fell senseless, he caught him by the shoulders and dragged him into the shadows of the pines.

"So far, so good!" the sport muttered, as he hastened back to the gate. "But if this thing keeps on I'll soon have the whole roost to myself."

Passing through the gate he crossed the walled court and boldly tried the first door he came to.

To his surprise it yielded, and he stepped inside.

A long corridor lay before him, with doors opening off both sides. Of these doors one stood ajar. There was a light within, and Cool Creede could distinguish, among a number of voices, that of Jared Prendergree.

Stepping softly to the door he peered in. A startling scene met his gaze.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

PRENDERGREE'S PREMONITION.

When Jared Prendergree strode away from the bank of Old Hat Creek with Gambler Ince in his arms, he headed for the Palace of Chance.

That the mine-manager was sadly shaken by the downfall of his ally was attested by his changed appearance. The usual floridity of his face had given way to extreme pallor, while his deep-set dark eyes were aglow with a light born of terror.

A premonition of further ill-luck was upon him, and as he hurried onward his ponderous legs trembled and almost gave way beneath him, while his breath came and went in short, sharp gasps.

Defly avoiding those of Occident's denizens whose curiosity led them toward him, Prendergree slipped around to the rear of the gambling-hall, where he entered Ince's private room and placed the gambler upon his bunk.

"Poor devil! You're better off than I thought, yet out of the game for many a long day to come!" the plotter muttered, as he turned on the light and hastily examined Ince's wound.

"Oh, yes. There's no doubt of that, at all," the gambler coolly replied. "But there'll be enough of me left to lift the scalp of Faro Dick, and after this night's work I'll leave no stone unturned to work the trick."

"My right arm is gone, for the most skillful surgeon on earth could not save it, shattered as it is; but gold and revenge shall solace me, and they may both be mine if you will work promptly."

"Call the boys together, and let us plot to win, then have Squills come in and patch me up."

Prendergree shook his head.

"The doctor first, man dear; business afterward, if there is time," he amended. "You're hard hit, and must fix yourself for flight, for all the plotting in the world will not avail us one iota now."

"Something tells me the game is lost, and—"

"Nonsense!" Ince sharply interrupted, a dark frown crossing his pallid face. "Don't weaken, man, for before day dawns we'll be in possession of the Orient."

Again Prendergree shook his head slowly but emphatically.

"It is a voice that never deceives me," he declared, his tones sinking almost to a whisper, while he glanced furtively around the room. "I tell you, Ince, we're in real danger for the first time since we jumped the Occident. Let us first prepare for flight to the stronghold, then plot to turn back the tide rising against us."

Ince laughed mockingly.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "Your nerve is sadly shaken, old pard; just as I suspected when you so blithely pronounced me dead a bit ago!"

"Look things squarely in the face with me, and then point out the danger of defeat."

"The trump cards are all in our hands, for we hold every heir to the mines save Jasper Fairfax, and he will be gathered in ere break of day."

"Then let the courts decide adversely; let Faro Dick and his allies drive us out of camp. A clean bill of sale, signed by the Drums, will clinch the Orient."

"Yes, yes, I understand that," Prendergree assured, nervously moistening his parched lips. "But we are in danger, nevertheless. Something tells me that fate is against us."

"But I will rally the boys—I will fight to the last, and when the end comes let no man reproach Prendergree!"

Thus speaking, the mine-manager sprang up and quitted the room, his oily face quivering with suppressed rage.

"Fool!" gritted Ince, as the door closed noisily behind his retreating ally. "Does he seek to impress me with his superstitious fancies, to lead me into helping him decamp with the booty, or is his fright real?"

"Be it the one or the other, I'll remain till the last, for the stakes are indeed high when both beauty and gold hang in the balance."

"The Occident shall yet be mine, and its fair owner my wife, for I suspect Pard Jared's daughter to be none other than the child of Kingsley, so long missing."

"Curse it! but for this arm I would hazard all on killing Fairfax and running off with the girl this very night!"

And, springing up from the couch, Ichabod Ince strode moodily to and fro, despite the pain of that fearful wound, inwardly cursing the stupidity which had held him blind to the real facts so long.

Thus the minutes passed, until a heavy tramping without announced the approach of Prendergree and his partners, when the gambler sank back upon the couch.

Then the door opened, and the mine-manager entered, closely followed by Jenkins, Mullet, and Skinny Dupont.

"Here we are, but nary Squills," Prendergree announced, as they filed into the room, averting his face to hide the malicious grin in his deep-set eyes.

"Now, squat, boys, and let's do business, for times are mighty hot beyond the creek, and we've not a minute to cut to waste."

"Lead off, Ince. You have the idea we want."

"We must clinch matters, that is all," the gambler declared, with a vicious nod. "Some one must go to the stronghold, draw up a bill of sale, and compel the Drums to sign it."

"But will we need it?" questioned Mullet. "I've just crossed from Orient. The chief and all the captives have been released, and the attack upon the mine is due. And with the force at hand, it should not fail."

"If it succeeds, so much the better," Ince declared. "But, win or lose, we should have the bill of sale, for it offers a valid excuse for this night's work."

"Then, too, the Drums must be gotten rid of. As captives, they are more dangerous to us than ever."

"Yes, yes! They must forever disappear," asserted Prendergree. "Jenkins and I will go at once to the stronghold and attend to the matter. We'll date the paper at Occident, a week back, and I reckon there'll be plenty of witnesses ready to swear they saw the Drums sign it."

"Oh, there's no doubt of that," Dupont asserted, just the ghost of a smile curling his thin lips. "And while you're gone Mullet and I will look after Ince and keep tabs on the fight across the creek."

A few hurried words followed, then Prendergree and Jenkins withdrew, to hasten to the mountain stronghold of Prince Mars, while Dupont went out to hunt up Squills, as the camp's doctor was called.

Nearly an hour had gone by when the wiry little rascal returned, and his face showed that he bore news of a disheartening character.

"The attempt to jump the mine has failed," he announced, as he crossed the threshold. "The Deserter Chief has been driven back with heavy loss, and some one must go at once for the other bands."

Ince rose from the couch, his face twitching with rage and pain.

"Curse it!" he growled. "Is Prendergree's premonition to indeed come true?"

"Go, Mullet, and collect the men in the lower camps, for the fight is now to the death, and every hand must help."

"And you, Skinny, take my horse and go for Red Rob and his band."

"Lose no time, either of you, and do not spare horseflesh, for every minute is precious."

"I will await here until Squills has fixed up my arm, then cross and see the Deserter Chief, for it must now be a siege instead of an open attack."

Dupont started, and a look of fresh concern came into his face.

"Pard, I had forgotten it, and I hate to tell you now, but Squills is drunk—stone-blind drunk," he declared, in a regretful tone. "Let Eph and I fix it, and then we'll be off."

But Gambler Ince, almost crazed with pain, uttered an oath and stamped the floor savagely, crying:

"No, no! Away with you!"

Mutely the men turned and departed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

WHAT DUPONT FOUND.

Dupont, although not a member of the desperate cohort known as the Occidental Mining Company, was one of its most trusted agents, and few of its secrets were hidden from him. The exact location of the rendezvous of each of the outlaw bands operating under Prince Mars was known to him, and thus he knew precisely where to go to find Red Rob, the road-agent.

Securing the splendid horse of Gambler Ince, he mounted and rode out of camp, laying his course in the direction of Wagon Gap trail.

"Fifty miles even, and that means daylight when I get there," he muttered, as the horse settled into a swift, tireless gallop. "It will be late in the afternoon when Red Rob reaches Orient, but if the Deserter Chief holds out till then the game is as good as won."

"It is strange, though, that Red Rob failed to appear to-day, for the word went to him as well as to the other; but it may be that I shall cut the trip short by meeting him coming."

Thus musing, the outlaw courier swept along until the yawning jaws of the Gap confronted him, when he swerved abruptly to the eastward and entered the denser shadows of a narrow, winding trail.

For upwards of an hour he continued at that same reckless pace, then, in the blackest and wildest part of the Gap, he abruptly drew rein and dismounted, to kneel and press his ear to the stony trail.

The actions of his horse had warned him of the approach of a rider or riders from the opposite direction, and Dupont was not one to hazard a bold advance just then.

"It must be Red Rob and his crowd," the outlaw muttered, as a faint but steadily increasing volume of sound met his straining ear. "There's all of fifty horses, and they are coming at a good clip, too."

For a moment he continued kneeling, then, as if assured of the identity of the approaching party, sprang to his feet, remounted and sped onward.

A moment later the trampling of many iron-shod hoofs came rumbling through the Gap, and Dupont, turning aside, urged his horse into a recess in one of the sharply-sloping walls.

That move was fatal to the outlaw.

Firm hands grasped him, and in less than the time it takes to tell it he was dragged from the saddle, disarmed, and bound.

"Thar', critter! Reckon ye won't ride ter ther fort for no sojers this night," uttered the leader of his captors, with a chuckle.

"Now, forward, lads, an' we'll turn him over ter Red Rob, fer he's ther spy we war' warned ter lay fer!"

Dupont drew a sharp breath of relief.

"Spy—the deuce!" he exclaimed. "Cut these ropes and give me my tools, or take me to Red Rob at once!"

"I'm Skinny Dupont, of Occident.

Things are in bad shape for the League there, and I am on my way to Red Rob for help."

The chief of the party uttered a sneering laugh, and again turned to his followers.

"Thet's a nice yarn, lads, but I reckon Red Rob will yank ther truth out o' him."

"Mount, and we'll ride out an' wait fer ther cap'n."

In another minute the party, six in all, were in the saddle. Then, while the chief spurred up the pass, the others, with the captive in their midst, slowly rode out into the Gap and awaited the approaching cavalcade, which was now near at hand.

Dupont was wild with rage at the treatment accorded him.

"Ho, there, Red Rob," he hailed, as the outlines of the oncoming riders became visible in the deep gloom. "Order your men to release me! I am the messenger of Prince Mars, and heart and soul with the Mountain League!"

"I do not doubt it, my man, for my chief of scouts has so reported to me," was the stern response.

"But you are mistaken in my identity. I am not Red Rob, the road-agent, but Captain Ernschaw, of the United States Army."

"Oh, Lord!" gasped the thunderstruck Dupont, and then as he came to understand the ruse by which the scout had led him to betray himself, he gritted his teeth in silent rage.

"Curses! the jig is up!" he muttered, as his furtive little eyes quickly scanned the force behind Captain Ernschaw. "There's at least a hundred of them, and the Occidental Mining Company is as good as whipped right now!"

And with this conclusion came the determination to make the best of his situation, and he coolly turned to Captain Ernschaw, saying:

"Well, cap, I reckon I've run my head into the halter for sure, this time."

"There's no mistake about that, my man," was the stern response, as the command again set forward.

"But a neck's a neck, cap, and I'm willing to dicker for mine," pursued the outlaw, unabashed. "I'm onto every nook and hole in the hills occupied by Prince Mars and his bands, and for my liberty I'll guide you straight to all."

"We know the routes."

"But not the short cuts," earnestly. "You may believe me or not, but I can put you inside the main stronghold within two hours, with not an outlaw to give the alarm."

"We shall be there within that time."

"And Red Rob's nest—"

"Has been raided and the chief killed and his followers captured."

"Now, silence your tongue, or I shall order you gagged, for this is not the time for idle chatter."

Again Dupont inwardly cursed his folly and lapsed into sullen silence.

The chief of scouts, Lasso Luke, had ridden forward with his men in buckskin as the command moved on, and before many minutes had passed, one of the scouts came riding back to report the discovery of an intersecting canyon leading off to the northward.

"Say to Lasso Luke to select a spot to camp, for we shall leave the horses there and press on afoot," the captain ordered, when he had heard the report, and, saluting, the courier again rode to the front.

In a short time the command reached the mouth of the canyon, where one of the scouts was found in waiting, with a message from the chief, advising that the party go into camp at that point.

"There's several good springs jest across ther Gap," the scout explained. "An' by campin' here we kin keep tab on who goes up an' down ther trail."

This plan suited Captain Ernschaw, and he gave the order to dismount.

Then a sergeant and five men were detailed to guard the horses and the prisoner, and the command moved silently up the canyon on foot.

Sergeant O'Malley was not long in arranging the temporary camp.

Sending two of the troopers up the can-

yon a short distance, he posted two at the mouth, and turned the horses loose.

The fifth man was sent some fifty yards up the Gap to stand guard, while, with the prisoner, the sergeant took up a similar position an equal distance down the trail.

"Now, do yez be aisy, me bhoy," he warned, forcing Dupont to a seat upon a boulder and sitting down beside him, cocked revolver in hand. "'Tis sorra a bit I'd loike to shoot yez, but if yez atttempt to go off dhis gun will be discharged, do yez moind?"

"Oh, yes, Paddy O'Malley, I understand," Dupont coolly assured. "But I am not thinking of levanting."

"You see, my hands are tied and my weapons gone, and what could I do if I did run away?"

"It's sorra a bit I can tell yez," returned the sergeant. "But should ye'r breath now, for it's tired I am."

Then silence came upon the two, and for over two hours neither spoke.

But the crafty brain of Dupont was busy.

The moon had crossed the zenith, and was sinking toward the west, flooding the Gap at that point with soft yellow light, and distinctly revealing the faces of both men.

For nearly half an hour Dupont had been closely, though covertly, studying the face of his keeper, and finally he cautiously asked:

"O'Malley, do you love gold?"

"Yis, by dhe saints! I do; but not your kind, ye dirty spalpeen!" was the prompt reply. "Now, close ye'r trap, or it's afther blowin'!"

A shot and a yell followed by a sharp fusillade interrupted the sergeant, and he swiftly leaped to his feet, revolver in hand.

Then out of the canyon dashed three horsemen, to thunder madly down the gap, with two of the troopers in swift pursuit.

"Be dhe powers! 'tis dhe outlaws!" O'Malley yelled, and then he opened fire with deadly effect.

The struggle was short and sharp, and when the smoke lifted, the three outlaws, the returning abductors of Adah Prendergree, lay dead in the trail.

But brave Sergeant O'Malley had paid for his fidelity with his life, while beside the boulder lay Skinny Dupont, with a bullet through his brain.

CHAPTER XL.

MULLET MEETS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

Urged on by Gambler Ince to rally the men in the lower camps, Ephraim Mullet lost little time in getting out of Occident.

Mounted on a good horse, he took the trail leading southward, and galloped on without adventure until within a mile of the entrance to Death Canyon.

Then, just as he was crossing a moon-lit space, out from the dense shadows of a clump of pines bordering the trail, a lone horseman suddenly appeared, within a dozen paces of Mullet.

"Hold hard, pilgrim, and don't draw," the stranger cried, over his leveled revolver, as he drew rein in the shadows. "I've got a little business with you, but if you go easy there'll be no harm done."

"You see, this gun is only a precaution. This is the land of the festive highwayman, and a man is mighty apt to get shot when he works a wrinkle of this kind if he isn't smart enough to get the drop right at the start."

"Oh, yes; there isn't a bit of doubt about that," assented Mullet, who was both puzzled and frightened, but cunning enough to put on a bold front. "And I'm free to say that if you didn't have me covered, I'd knock you out of the saddle with a bullet or two."

"But state your business as quickly as possible, for I am in something of a hurry."

The stranger chuckled.

"Certainly! certainly!" he exclaimed, in a jovial way. "I wished to ask you a few questions."

"My name is Delmonte Coleridge, and I hail from St. Louis.

"I am looking for a man who travels under the name of Ephraim Mullet. It is said that he hangs out in or around Prickly Pear Camp, and as you were coming from that direction I thought perhaps you could give me some information concerning him."

Mullet's face grew white, but by a desperate effort he retained his composure, and in a voice of forced steadiness replied:

"Mullet—Mullet? Stranger, I've heard that name, but the man has left Prickly Pear. He started south some time ago, and no one around the camp has heard from him since."

"That is bad," soliloquized Coleridge. Then:

"You don't know where he was going?"

"He started for the lower camps," was the truthful reply.

"Well, he must be found. His right name, by the way, is James Hornbeak, and he was a professional burglar a few years ago. In one of his raids he killed a St. Louis banker, and now a hemp necktie is waiting for him there."

A sickly smile crossed Mullet's face.

"Such people deserve to hang," he declared, with forced energy. "I wish you success in your search, Mr. Coleridge, but I must ask you to permit me to pass on, for I am in a hurry, just as I stated a moment ago."

But at that moment the St. Louis detective urged his horse forward, and as he rode out into the moonlight a yell of terror burst from the lips of Mullet.

"Faro Dick, the White Sport!" he fairly screamed, reeling blindly in his saddle.

"Yes, Ephraim, Faro Dick!" was the quiet rejoinder, and then the sport-detective snapped a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of the entrapped desperado. "I've had my eye on you for a long time, in an incidental way, but was never quite sure you were really Hornbeak till tonight."

"Just after the attempt to jump the Orient failed, our spies brought in word that you and Dupont were to go for reinforcements, and I determined to head you off. See?"

Mullet evidently "saw," but he vouchsafed no response. He was utterly unnerved.

Removing his captive's belt of arms, the White Sport hurriedly prepared to return to camp; but at that juncture the trampling of many iron-shod hoofs not far away warned him of the approach of a considerable force of men, and he quickly rode into the timber bordering the trail.

A moment later a troop of cavalry, dusty and travel-stained, came into view, and with a breath of relief the sport returned to his former position and calmly awaited their approach.

At sight of the two men in the trail, the captain and an aide spurred forward, and then came the greeting:

"Faro Dick! is it you?"

"Yes, Captain Dudley, it is I," and with the words the sport warmly grasped the extended hand of the cavalryman.

"The colonel got my letter, captain?"

"Yes, Dick, and within an hour afterward a complete map of the hills and the outlaw dens, with a table of the strength of the various gangs, from Foxfoot, the Hermit.

"Two companies were immediately ordered out. Captain Ernschaw is advancing by the northern route, destroying the bands as he comes, while I was ordered to Prickly Pear by way of Death Canyon."

"But whom have you here?"

"Hornbeak, a St. Louis murderer, but affiliated for some years past with Prince Mars and his crowd."

"My God! not Hornbeak, the murderer of David Dudley, the banker?"

"The same, captain."

"Then he is the slayer of my father," and as the words rang out the cavalryman's face grew white, while Mullet cowered in his saddle.

"Yes, captain, though I never knew you were Banker Dudley's son," the White Sport returned.

"But I will place him in your custody, to be sent to St. Louis for trial, for I know he will not escape you."

"Never—never will he escape!" and Captain Dudley moistened his parched lips.

Then the troop again moved forward, and in little more than an hour, drew rein just below Orient, while scouts were sent ahead to learn the condition of affairs in the camp.

They were not long absent, but their report sent every man to his saddle with a rush.

The Deserter Chief and his followers were massing again to attack the mine, and with a word of caution to his men, Captain Dudley gave the order to move forward, slowly and silently, until the alarm was given, then to charge into the outlaw ranks.

"Make every shot and every thrust tell," he ordered, grimly.

And the order was obeyed to the letter. Moving silently forward, the troop gained the center of the camp without detection; then a wild yell of alarm rang out, and the next minute the troop thundered forward with the resistless fury of an avalanche.

Taken completely by surprise, the Deserter Chief's men broke and fled in every direction after the first volley had thinned their ranks, leaving the ground strewn with their fellows, dead or wounded.

The Deserter Chief himself led the flight. Plunging into the undergrowth, he scrambled hastily up the sharp slope of the mountain until he had gained a sheltered spot several hundred yards above the camp, where he paused and looked back.

"Ten thousand curses upon you!" he gritted, as he shook his clenched hand at the men below. "I have lost and you have triumphed, but the end is not yet."

"No, no! our power is too great to be destroyed by a single defeat! I will rally the men and invoke the aid of the Church, and then woe unto the Gentile invaders!"

Quivering with passion and with eyes glittering balefully, he turned and resumed his way along the mountain side.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DESERTER CHIEF'S DISCOVERY.

Half crazed with rage and chagrin the Deserter Chief sped rapidly onward until near the jaws of Wagon Trail Gap, where he turned and descended into the little valley.

"I will go straight to the stronghold," he muttered, pausing in the shadows for a brief breathing spell. "I must have a talk with the Queen, and then at day-break we can send up the signal smoke to call the boys together in a last rally, for it is now win or lose on one bold venture."

"Curses upon our blind stupidity! Had we acted a year ago, success would have been ours."

Reflecting thus for some minutes, the outlaw suddenly shook himself sharply, as if thrusting off physical lethargy and arousing his muscles to renewed activity, then started up the trail at a brisk pace.

Just as he entered the Gap, he was abruptly confronted by a horseman, and swiftly his hands dropped to the weapons in his belt.

"Steady, pardner! I've got you lined!" warned the rider, and the revolver in his hand gleamed brightly in the moonlight.

The Chief started and stared sharply at the man.

"By Heavens! Is it you, Gold Dan?" he exclaimed.

The horseman in turn shrank back, then returned that intense look, and hoarsely demanded:

"Who calls that name? Who—?"

"Thunder! Et's Lieutenant Edgeworth himself, an' ther jig is up fer me ef he escapes, so his doom is sealed!"

And with the words the desperado fired, but missed, while an answering shot rang out from the weapon of the Deserter Chief, and the horse fell dead in his

tracks, hurling his rider headlong upon the stony trail.

Bounding to the side of the fallen man, the Chief quickly disarmed him, then looked to his injuries.

The fall had jarred the breath from Gold Dan's body, but beyond that he was not hurt, and in a few minutes he sat up and drew his hand across his eyes in a dazed way.

"What happened, pardner?" he asked, speaking slowly and indistinctly.

"You fired at me, Gold Dan, but missed, and I returned the shot, killing your horse and throwing you out of the saddle. The trail was harder than your head, and the fall knocked the breath out of you," the Deserter Chief tersely explained.

"Yas, yas! I 'members, now!" and the desperado struggled weakly to his feet.

"Wal, lieutenant, I guessed heads an' you threw tails, so I lose an' you win; but yod'll find me game to meet bullet or rope, fer Gold Dan is no coward!"

"No, you never were a coward," the Chief returned, smiling grimly. "But you are in no danger of bullet or rope from me, Gold Dan, unless you force me to kill you, for I, too, am a deserter—a fugitive from Uncle Sam," and the outlaw's voice rang with bitterness.

The desperado stared blankly at the Chief, as if loth to believe his ears.

"I quarreled with my captain, stabbed him through the heart, and fled," pursued the Chief. "But I had long been the secret agent of a band of outlaws, so joined them and became their leader, and am known as the Deserter Chief."

"Thunder! pard, ye do s'prise me now, fer I am one o' ye'r men," Gold Dan cried, extending his hand. "I belong ter Red Rob's outfit."

"So I heard," and again the Chief smiled grimly. "But life is a queer thing, Gold Dan. Man knows little of his fellows, and it is only when stern fate rends the mask that we see men as they are."

"My grandfather was a corsair, and my father and mother were outlaws; yet I, the offspring of vice and crime, am a graduate of West Point, was an officer in the army, and society was ever ready to receive me with open arms."

"So much for the cunning mask woven by my father and mother, to further their ends. Fate stepped in, I slew my captain, deserted to escape punishment, and at once sank to my proper level."

Musingly, yet bitterly, spoke the Deserter Chief, and when he had finished he sighed deeply.

Gold Dan stood silent a moment, then shifted about restlessly, and finally said:

"Wal, pard chief, I hates ter say et, but I was lookin' fer you, an' et's bad news I bring."

"Thar's ther very deuce ter pay, fer Red Rob hes b'in wiped out an' ther den destroyed, an' I alone escaped!"

Again the face of the Deserter Chief grew white and drawn, and he shrank back in renewed alarm.

"That is indeed bad news, Gold Dan," he exclaimed, hoarsely.

"Et's ther kind o' news I hates ter kerry with me, Chief, but thar's no help fer et this time," the desperado returned.

"A troop o' cavalry charged down on us just es we was startin' fer Prickly Pear. They hed us in a pocket, an' Red Rob was killed ther fust fire. After thet, ther band jest went ter pieces. Those who war' not killed war' captured an' sent on ter ther fort under strong guard, an' ther cavalry are movin' this way now es fast es hossflesh will bring 'em, bound either fer ther stronghold or Prickly Pear."

"It's the camp, I reckon, for the stronghold is impregnable," the Deserter Chief remarked, though not without a start of alarm.

"So I've heard said. But I escaped, got ahead o' ther troop, an' came on ter warn you."

"It is well that you did, Gold Dan, for it will give many of us a chance to escape, to rally when the troops are gone."

"But I am going to the stronghold"

now, and will leave you to go on to the camp and warn the boys.

"Go to the Salt Lake Hotel in Occident and ask for the landlord or Gambler Ince. The word 'Empire' is all you need to say, for they will understand it. It means flight.

"Be careful, too, when you reach the camp, for the troops are there and in full possession."

Gold Dan laughed and shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Trust me fer that, Chief!" he exclaimed. "The bluecoats want my neck in a halter, but I do reckon et's ketchin' afore hangin'."

Then the two outlaws shook hands, and the Deserter Chief resumed his flight to the stronghold, while Gold Dan hastened toward the camp with long, swinging strides.

Arrived in Prickly Pear, he slouched his hat over his eyes and passed unchallenged to the bridge, where he crossed into Occident.

Many of the miners of the rival camps were up and about, but as the place was full of strangers, his presence was unnoticed.

"Et's easy es rollin' off a log," he muttered, striding along toward the Salt Lake Hotel. "I had an idea from ther way ther Chief spoke I might run up ag'in' et, an' I've kep' my legs ready fer a sprint. But et's all over but ther shoutin'."

But the fellow's confidence was misplaced.

Stepping boldly into the hotel bar-room, he was both surprised and alarmed to find it in possession of a squad of regulars.

"Holy smoke! et's a hornet's nest, fer sure!" he gasped, and he started precipitately toward the door.

"Quick! seize that man!" ordered a stern voice, and the next minute Gold Dan found himself a prisoner.

"By Heavens! As I thought, it is Gold Dan, the deserter and murderer!" cried Captain Dudley, as he bent a keen look upon the white, terrified face of the outlaw. "He must not escape!"

Meanwhile, the Deserter Chief was hastening toward the stronghold as rapidly as the tortuous route would permit.

Absolute ruin stared the Mountain League in the face, and fear lent speed to his tired limbs.

On reaching the canyon, he was both surprised and alarmed to find the bridge open.

"What does this mean?" he ejaculated, clapping his hands upon his revolvers and glaring fearfully around. "Can it be possible—"

"No, no; it is accursed carelessness upon the part of the guards, and they shall pay for it most dearly."

Then in a loud voice he uttered the usual hail:

"Hallo! hallo!"

For fully two minutes he waited, but there was no response, save the echoes of his voice.

Fearful of a trap, he repeated the hail.

This time there was an answer. A stifled groan sounded near at hand, and as the Deserter Chief glanced around he decided that the sound had come from a niche in the rocks near by.

Advancing cautiously, cocked revolver in hand, he peered into the niche.

A startling sight met his gaze.

There, firmly bound, back to back, and gagged, lay two of his most trusty followers.

"There has been bad work here," he muttered, and, drawing his knife, he released the men.

Neither of the rascals could tell him anything, beyond the fact that they had been attacked singly and knocked senseless. But both were quite sure that not more than one man had done the trick.

"It's that infernal sport, Cool Creede," the Deserter Chief declared, savagely.

"Come, boys, pull yourselves together and guard the bridge. The fellow's somewhere in the stronghold, and we must see to it that he never leaves alive!"

CHAPTER XLII.

THE PRINCE'S CAPTIVES.

That Adah Prendergree was a girl of rare courage none who knew her could doubt.

Her bitter resistance to capture, resulting in the death of one of the outlaws, was ample proof of a fearless nature.

Then, too, she had displayed coolness and nerve throughout that hurried flight to the mountain stronghold, and her desperate captors could not help admiring her magnificent pluck and endurance.

But when that heavy door clanged shut behind her, and the key grated harshly in the lock, a crushing realization of her utter helplessness flashed upon her, and she sank limply to the floor.

Overwrought nature had given way, and she had fainted.

Yet, she was not alone in her misery.

At the far end of the long, low room, two girls were seated disconsolately upon the edge of a couch.

Needless to say, they were Rosa Lee and Jessie Fairfax.

The major's daughter had almost recovered from her rough experiences of the preceding night, but her face was pale, and dark rings encircled her vivid black eyes.

Jessie Fairfax was in striking contrast to the beautiful brunette. She was a tall, fair girl, with light brown hair and big blue eyes. Her face was pale and sad, and her eyes showed that she had been weeping.

The sudden opening of the door had broken in upon the desultory conversation carried on by the two girls, and as Adah Prendergree was pushed into the room both sprang to their feet.

"Ah! it is another victim, and she has fainted!" Rosa Lee exclaimed, as the captive sank down.

Both girls hastened forward. Raising Adah from the floor, they carried her to the rear of the room and gently placed her upon the couch.

"Yes, she has fainted," Rosa Lee continued, after a moment. "We must bring her to."

Then, with many expressions of wonder as to the hapless creature's identity, they set to work to resuscitate her.

The task was a short one. Adah Prendergree opened her eyes, sat up and looked around with a startled air.

"Where am I?" she ejaculated.

The girls looked at each other, and Jessie Fairfax sadly replied:

"This is the stronghold of Prince Mars. You are a captive."

Nodding her head violently, Adah sprang to her feet.

"Yes, yes!" she exclaimed, with some excitement. "I remember now. They stole me from Occident to-night and brought me here, and I fainted as they pushed me through the door."

"Yes, it is all clear, now, and I thank you for your kindness in reviving me."

Then her dark eyes looked wistfully from one to the other of the girls.

"You are captives, too?" she asked.

"Yes, like yourself, we have both been stolen and dragged to this infamous den," Rosa Lee returned, and she hastily outlined the adventures of herself and Jessie Fairfax.

Adah Prendergree, sinking demurely upon the edge of the couch, listened most attentively.

"It is a singular thing," she remarked, after a moment's reflection. "Here we are, the three of us, all captives, and all torn from home and friends within a few hours of each other."

"It means something, most assuredly; just what, I'd like to know, although I believe I can make a pretty close guess at the fate marked out for me."

"I am called Adah Prendergree, but my name is Adah Kingsley, for in infancy I was stolen from my parents by an abominable red-faced old wretch who goes by the name of Jared Prendergree."

"Secretly he is a Mormon of the most rabid stamp, and an outlaw, and he has determined to make me marry one of his saintly followers."

Both listeners held up their hands in horror.

"But I'll never do it—never!" pursued Adah, emphatically.

"And you were stolen in infancy, you say?" asked Rosa Lee, excitedly. "How sad!—how romantic!"

"Yes, I suppose it is!" Adah assented, in a matter-of-fact way. "But I am of a rebellious nature, and when I think of it I get mad instead of shedding tears."

"You see, I have never had a particle of respect for this Prendergree, while the woman who for years posed as my mother I fairly detested. Instinct, I suppose, taught me to regard them as enemies, and when I was packed off to school for a number of years it was a matter of no small relief to me."

"But the end came, and I was compelled to come here, to this miserable mining hamlet of the mountains. My supposititious mother had vanished, and Prendergree coolly informed me that she had become insane and was confined in a private mad-house—a statement which I soon discovered to be a lie, for she came secretly to the house a number of times."

"That something was wrong I well knew, for I was compelled to go heavily veiled when away from the house. Then, one day, when riding down the valley, I dismounted to rest, and had removed my veil, when I was suddenly accosted by a tall, old man, who had been lurking in the bushes near by."

"Child!" he exclaimed, "is not your name Kingsley?"

"Oh, no! sir!" I replied, not at all affrighted, as he was a kindly-looking old gentleman. "My name is Adah Prendergree!"

"Prendergree!—Prendergree!" he muttered, and then his face underwent a sudden and violent change. "Child, those wretches are not your parents."

"Your right name is Adah Kingsley, and you are the living image of your dead mother. You were stolen from your parents when a little child."

"Seek, and the truth will come to you!"

"That was all, for he turned and disappeared in the undergrowth. But the words had made a deep impression on me, and I vainly sought to meet him again."

"Then Prendergree and I quarreled, and I threw the stranger's words in his face, with the declaration that I was not his daughter."

"I wish you could have seen him. If ever conscious guilt was portrayed upon a human face, it was upon the fat, red, ugly old face of Jared Prendergree."

Jessie Fairfax shuddered.

"I would have been afraid to do it," she exclaimed.

"She did just right!" Rosa Lee declared, her black eyes snapping spiritedly.

"Yes, I think it was about the proper thing to do," observed Adah, with an emphatic nod. "I knew Prendergree to be a cowardly ruffian, capable of almost any meanness when crossed, but I was armed with a splendid little revolver, and I wasn't at all afraid of him."

"In fact, it would have afforded me pleasure, I think, to have found a reasonable excuse for shooting him!"

"You see, I had found out a good deal. While riding, one day, my pony became frightened and ran away, and I would have been killed but for a gallant young rancher who came to my assistance and saved my neck at the risk of his own."

"After that, Mr. Fairfax and I chanced to meet several times, and we became good—"

"Jasper Fairfax?" interrupted Jessie, eagerly.

"Yes, Jasper Fairfax," Adah returned, an expression of surprise mantling her beautiful face. "Are you—"

"I am his sister," Jessie explained.

"Oh!" and with that syllable of relief, a rosy tell-tale flush came over Adah's face, and the girls forgot their troubles and laughed outright.

Then Jessie and Adah rushed into each other's arms, and for the moment the story was forgotten.

But their unhappy position soon recurred to them, and the mirth died out

of their voices and they again settled down to serious talk, when Adah continued:

"One day, while we were out riding, the words of the old stranger recurred to me, and I repeated them to Mr. Fairfax. He seemed surprised, but at once took the old man's view of the case, because of the name of Kingsley, and told me the secret history of the Occident mine.

"At the same time he presented me with the revolver, as a means of defense against Prendergree and his ruffians, and promised to sift the matter to the bottom. Between us we have managed to learn enough to convince us that I am really Adah Kingsley, daughter of one of the discoverers of the Occident mine, but we have neither of us been able to find definite proof.

"It is this fact, I believe, which has decided Prendergree to force me into a marriage with one of his henchmen, for it is only three days since we had a terrible quarrel, in which I again charged him with having stolen me.

"The fact that Mr. Fairfax and I had been meeting for some time past, also came out, and then the rage of the ugly old wretch knew no bounds.

"From that time till I was abducted to-night I was kept a close prisoner, and I am quite sure that he is behind the outrage.

"But I am going to escape—I am going to baffle him, and then let him beware, for justice shall be done!"

The girl's voice rang out sharply, and her dark eyes flashed with dire ire.

Her companions applauded her determination, and then the three sat down and calmly discussed the situation.

Some time had gone by thus, when the door suddenly opened, and Jasper Fairfax was roughly shoved into the room!

CHAPTER XLIII.

PREPARING TO ESCAPE.

The three girls sprang to their feet, a cry of surprise ringing from the lips of each.

"Jasper! Jasper!" cried Jessie, and running forward she flung her arms about her brother's neck and burst into tears.

Adah and Rosa-Lee were not far behind her, but the greeting they accorded the captive was of a less effusive nature.

While all were glad to see the young rancher alive and apparently uninjured after the many perils of the preceding few days, the heart of each sank at the knowledge that he was a captive.

His hands, which had been securely fastened at his back, were quickly released, and then the quartet sat down, and mutual explanations were made.

In brief, while guarding the prisoners at the Ace of Spades, Fairfax had been knocked senseless by a portion of the falling wall, at the time of the explosion, and had recovered consciousness only to find himself a captive and en route to the mountain stronghold of the outlaws.

But escape was now the thought uppermost in the mind of the young rancher, and as soon as the situation had been made clear to all, he arose and began an examination of his surroundings.

The door through which he had been so rudely ushered was found to be securely locked; but Fairfax had expected nothing else, and without waste of time proceeded to feel his way carefully along the rough wooden wall.

A single lantern, suspended from the low ceiling by means of a slender chain, was the only means of illumination the room contained, and its murky light failed to penetrate the more distant recesses of that large, but prison-like cell.

And yet the rancher felt that the semi-gloom was an advantage, for under its friendly cover he could work without fear of detection by the spy probably set to watch the movements of the captives.

With varying emotions the three girls watched the progress of Fairfax. In the heart of each, hope and fear were struggling for the mastery.

But the circuit of the room was made

without result. The rough walls had evidently been built for a prison, and were without a break in them, save that single narrow door.

Next, the floor claimed the rancher's attention. It, too, was of wood, and gave forth a hollow sound, plainly betraying the fact that there was a chamber or cavity of some sort below.

Then, in a corner, at the end of a wooden bunk built against the wall, Fairfax discovered a small trap, some twenty inches square. It was snugly fitted into the floor, and so cunningly concealed that chance alone led to its detection.

In kneeling, the rancher's boot had struck squarely against the head of a nail projecting slightly from the wall, forcing it inward, whereupon the trap immediately sank, carrying him with it.

A startled cry burst from his lips as he felt himself sinking, and he vainly essayed to leap back upon the solid floor; but so swift was the descent of the trap that he succeeded only in grasping the edge of the floor, where he clung for a moment, then dropped completely from view.

Stifled screams of terror came from the girls as they noted that sudden and complete disappearance, and then Adah ran forward and knelt at the edge of the opening.

"Sh!" warned Fairfax, from below. "Quiet the girls. I am not hurt!"

The distance the rancher had fallen was short, and, happily, he had landed upon his feet, with the force of the fall broken by that timely grasp at the edge of the floor.

Steadying himself, he turned, after that brief warning to Adah, and carefully scanned his surroundings.

He found himself in a room slightly smaller than the one above, but like it, in that it had rough wooden walls and was lighted with a lantern suspended from the ceiling.

These facts the rancher noted at a glance, and more.

It was the arsenal of the Mountain League.

Rifles of improved pattern were stacked near the walls, while behind them hung a number of revolvers, knives and cartridge belts.

Then, in a dark recess, there were a number of cartridge cases, powder kegs, and other material of that nature.

As in the room above, there was but one visible outlet—a narrow door.

Equipping himself with a belt, a brace of heavy revolvers and a knife, Fairfax loaded the weapons from a cartridge case he found open, then filled his belt and moved toward the door.

To his surprise it was not locked.

Stepping out he found himself in a long, narrow hallway, with a door at each end, both of which were securely fastened with heavy locks.

In no wise discouraged, he retraced his steps to the arsenal, and after a short search discovered an axe. Putting it aside, he selected four rifles, and belts and revolvers for the girls, then loaded the weapons and placed them beside the axe.

That done, he returned to the corner in which the trap was located, and explained the situation to Adah, whereupon each of the girls lowered herself through the hole in the floor and dropped into the arms of Fairfax.

A hasty examination of the trap disclosed that it could not be raised without considerable delay, and the rancher decided to leave it as it was.

The arms were then distributed among the girls, and Fairfax, axe in hand, led the way into the corridor.

Selecting the door leading into the courtyard, the rancher smashed the lock with a few vigorous blows of the axe, and then all four found themselves in the outer air.

But the sound of the heavy blows upon the lock had alarmed the sentry at the gate on that side of the courtyard, and he came running up, revolver in hand, as Fairfax stepped out.

The escaping captives out-numbered

him four to one, however, and as all were fully armed and desperate, the outlaw made a virtue of necessity, dropped his weapon and threw up his hands.

Then, at the point of a revolver, he was marched to the nearest gate, which he sullenly unlocked and flung open.

Then, as a sharp cry escaped the lips of the outlaw, all shrank back in sudden alarm.

A cordon of armed men confronted them!

CHAPTER XLIV.

A VILLAINOUS PLOT.

Let us follow, for a brief space, the fortunes of Jared Prendergree and Landlord Jenkins.

On quitting the apartment of Gambler Ince, the evil pair strolled leisurely along the one winding, irregular street of Occident, talking in low tones, until they had reached the door of a small saloon, near the footbridge, known as Irish Teddy's Place, where they paused.

"I left Squills right in here, drunk as a lord," Prendergree explained. "Ince was inclined to cut up rusty, and to get square with him I filled the pill sharp up in short order and provided him with funds for a roaring drunk.

"Come—let us see if the game is working right."

"Oh, there can be no doubt that it is moving along smoothly," Jenkins declared, in his oily way. "Drink is the curse of the man's life, and a dollar or two means a drunk with him, every time."

"That's the way I figured it," rejoined Prendergree, complacently.

"You see, Ab, there are too many of us in this game. When it comes to dividing the profits it will cut things to a fine figure to go around equally among the leaders, and I've reached the conclusion that I'd take in one good man to act with me, and thin out the rest.

"McMurtree and the Shoshone are dead, and if Ince is left to himself, he'll put a bullet through his head before morning. That will leave you and the Deserter Chief, Mullet, Red Rob, and myself to share with the Queen; but if we work the game right there will be only you and myself left, besides the Queen, at the grand divide, and that means a mine for each of us, while she takes the booty."

"The game is worth the risk, most certainly," Jenkins declared, after a moment's reflection, though just how we are to rid ourselves of the others I don't see."

"Leave that to me," returned Prendergree. "I have the whole thing mapped out."

"In fact, I could work the wrinkle alone, but I prefer a partner, for accidents may happen, and so I selected you as the man most likely to help me pull through."

"Well, you can depend upon me to keep my end up," Absalom Jenkins returned, in an arrogant way. "You know I am not given to boasting, but I feel safe in saying that no man in the two camps can throw dust in my face when it comes to a matter of this kind."

"To be candid, I could have seized the mines long ago, but on your account held off, for we were old pals and I hated to go back on you. Had I known your position in the matter, we might have been in absolute possession now."

The two men were standing in the shadows of the building, and the deep gloom hid the amused smile that crossed Prendergree's crafty face.

"I appreciate your consideration, Ab, but now that we understand each other we can work toward a common end, and it will be a singular thing indeed if we fail," he assured.

"We'll go at once to the rendezvous, explain our position to the Queen, and secure the signatures of the Drums to a bill of sale. That done, we can dispose of them, and send word to the fort that will bring a general raid upon Prince Mars and drive his bands out of the Territory forever."

"Yes, yes. That is the idea I had," Jenkins declared. "We can set up the plea that we have bought the Orient, but are unable to obtain possession, and thus make it so hot for the Prince that he'll be glad to go, if he escapes capture."

Then the two men talked in whispers for a few minutes, after which Jenkins entered Irish Teddy's Place to look after the condition of Squills.

"Fool!" muttered Prendergree, as his ally disappeared. "You will serve my purpose, now that I need help, but when the end comes—"

The mine-manager did not finish the sentence, but a dark look crossed his heavy face, a look that boded ill to Absalom Jenkins.

A moment later the landlord appeared and reported the doctor in a drunken stupor. Then both men crossed the bridge and set off toward Wagon Trail Gap at a rapid walk.

It was, indeed, a startling scene that met the gaze of the daring spy, Cool Creede.

Five persons were in the room, seated around a rough table—two men partially bound and evidently prisoners, two armed desperadoes and a woman.

And this woman was the old beldame, the Queen of the Mountain League, Annette, the daughter of Andreas, the searover.

Of the two desperadoes, the larger was Jared Prendergree, the other Absalom Jenkins, landlord of the Salt Lake Hotel of Occident.

"It's a case of life or death with you, Duke and Basil Drumm," spoke Prendergree, slowly and deliberately, while he toyed with the trigger of the revolver in his hand. "We must have that paper, and you must sign it."

"Suppose we do sign it—what then?" demanded Duke Drumm, his keen blue eyes meeting the mine-manager's lowering gaze unflinchingly. "What assurance have we that you will keep your word?"

"You do not need assurance. You must simply trust us."

Basil Drumm sprang half-erect, then sank helplessly into his seat.

"Trust you!" he cried, his eyes flashing fiercely. "Better by far would we trust a pack of ravening wolves! Scoundrel! do your worst! I, for one, will never sign that paper!"

"Nor will I," added Duke, quietly.

Prendergree and Jenkins exchanged glances. That they meant murder Cool Creede did not doubt, and he silently prepared to act.

But the Outlaw Queen rose to her feet, and, with an imperious gesture, checked the movement of her murderous allies.

"Listen, Duke Drumm, and you, Basil Drumm," she cried, her harsh old voice quivering with suppressed fury. "You have a chance for life—slender, it is true, but yet a chance. Refuse to accept it, and just that surely shall you die!"

"You have heard of the vendetta sworn against you and yours by the corsair's daughter, and you know that it has been faithfully kept, for of your immediate family you two alone survive."

"Know ye now that I am Annette, the pirate's daughter, the slayer of the Fairfaxs, Kingsleys and Drumms. My hands are dripping with the blood of your kinsmen, and unless you yield and sign over the mine the morrow's sun shall not find you alive."

"Yield, and I will forswear the vendetta forever and furnish you a safe escort to the fort upon your promise not to divulge what has occurred here this night."

"Now answer, and answer quickly, for I am not one to wait."

Mutely the brothers gazed at each other a moment, then from the lips of each burst the words:

"Never!"

"Then upon your heads be your fate!" and with a chilling smile the Queen sank back in her chair.

Cool Creede nerved himself for the ordeal.

At the same instant a door behind him opened, and a man entered the corridor.

It was the Deserter Chief.

For just a breath the outlaw stood still, then suddenly flung himself forward, hurling the reckless sport headlong into the room, while through the building rang the wild cry:

"We are betrayed! There is a spy among us!"

CHAPTER XLV.

PRENDERGREE CONFESSES.

Naught but cat-like agility saved Cool Creede a dangerous fall when he was so suddenly hurled head first through the doorway at which he had been listening.

As that wild cry rang through the corridor, and the sport, under the impetus of a powerful push between the shoulders, plunged headlong into the room, both Prendergree and Jenkins leaped to their feet and drew their weapons.

Down went Cool Creede, but a flying grasp at the corner of the table saved his head, and then, with bewildering swiftness, he was upon his feet, his revolvers ringing out right and left.

A dozen shots rang out, filling the room with smoke, but when it had cleared away the sport was yet upon his feet, though bleeding freely from a wound in his shoulder, while Prendergree and Jenkins had both gone down, the one wounded, the other dead.

And just inside the door lay the sport's unknown assailant, his head pillowed on the bosom of the Queen of the League, whose pitiful wails rang weirdly through the ill-omened place in grief for her son.

Grimly, Cool Creede faced that open doorway, expecting that others of the outlaw clan would appear; then, as they came not, he moved swiftly behind the table, where he cut the bonds of the two prisoners.

"Rise, gentlemen, and secure the weapons of those devils on the floor," he urged, again moving back to command the door. "Others will be upon us in a moment!"

And, as if in verification of the words, a heavy trampling sounded just then in the hall, and the next minute the doorway was filled with armed men.

But they were not outlaws.

They were the gallant boys in blue. The stronghold of Prince Mars had fallen, and was now in the hands of the strong detachment of United States regulars under Captain Ernschaw.

The patient, secret trailing of Justin Fairfax had at last borne fruit. Guided by his skillfully-drawn maps, Captain Ernschaw had found the carefully hidden natural entrance to the stronghold, and was in full possession.

It was a squad of his men who had met the escaping captives at the gate in the wall, as detailed in the preceding chapter.

Prendergree was dying, and with death staring him in the face he weakened and confessed. Much that he said is of little interest now, and is therefore omitted from this narrative.

In early life, he had met and secretly married Isabel Ramon, whom the reader knows as Annette, the corsair's daughter. This woman, in appearance but a girl, was really near thirty years of age, and at the time had a child, a son, some eight or nine years old. This boy grew to manhood, and has been variously known in these pages as Kent Keene, the Deserter Chief and Prince Mars—transforming himself into this latter character by means of a cunning disguise, which included an artificial hump to fit between his shoulders, thus giving him the appearance of a hunchback and completely hiding his identity.

Balked in an attempt to secure the Fairfax thousands by entrapping Justin Fairfax into a marriage with her, through certain disclosures made by Duval Kingsley, Isabel Prendergree had sworn a vendetta against both the Fairfax and Kingsley families, and this vendetta she followed to the bitter end.

The first step had been the abduction of little Adah Kingsley. Justin Fairfax had disappeared, but her hatred and her vow extended beyond him, and through her unceasing machinations the Fairfax family were ruined.

Then circumstances drove her West, where fate stepped in and permitted her to continue the vendetta.

Justin Fairfax and Duval Kingsley were dispossessed of their mine, as the reader

has seen, and Kingsley finally poisoned, while the family of Nathan Fairfax was destroyed, with the exception of Jasper and Jessie, for whom the plotters yet had use in their attempt to secure valid titles to the mines.

Working, in large measure, upon the superstitions of the mountain desperadoes and aided and abetted by Mormon dignitaries of high rank, the woman had succeeded in gathering around her a large band, the command of which she had bestowed upon her villainous son. The chain and padlock of precious metal were held in high esteem as unfailing omens of continued fortune, and it was the inflexible rule that, where a captain was slain in one of their raids, his body should be brought back to the stronghold, that the emblem might be removed, and thus not her living subjects. Where this was pass out of the keeping of the Queen and clearly impossible, the head was to be removed and the emblem secured, for none held the keys save the Queen.

Thus was the mystery of the headless bodies solved, and all drew a breath of relief when it was known that the Mountain League was utterly routed and scattered.

Prendergree lingered till sunrise, then died, and his body and that of Jenkins were buried in a crevice in the mountain top.

The Queen and her wounded son had mysteriously vanished, going none knew whither, although it was the general belief that both had committed suicide by leaping into the swift mountain torrent at the bottom of the canyon.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE TWO SPORTS' CLOSING ACTS.

Shortly after daybreak, the sport and the liberated captives, with a strong escort of soldiers, quitted the stronghold and proceeded to Prickly Pear Camp, while Captain Ernschaw remained to blow up the dangerous rendezvous.

Arrived at Prickly Pear, rescued and rescuers found that a great change had occurred during their absence.

Captain Dudley and his regulars had made a clean sweep.

Thus ended the attempt to jump the Orient mine; and as none of the Mountain League ever appeared to dispute the title of the Occident, it passed into the hands of the heirs of the original discoverers without further contention.

One of the first moves of the military, after the outlaws had fled, was to search Occident most thoroughly, and many evidences of outlawry were brought to light.

Gambler Ince was discovered, dead, with a bullet through his brain. Crazed by the intense pain of the neglected wound, he had ended all by firing a bullet into his head, as predicted by Jared Prendergree.

Old Pat and his wife, the servants of Prendergree, were also found and released, and by noon the rival camps had settled down to a new order of things.

Duke and Basil Drumm, relieved of the constant dread of Prendergree and his desperate followers, were profuse in their thanks to Cool Creede and the White Sport for their valuable services, and urged upon the sport detectives a suitable reward—nothing less than a half-interest in the Occident mine.

Major Benson Lee and Foxfoot, the Hermit, arrived during the forenoon, and great was the joy of the old officer when he beheld Rosa, safe and unharmed.

Then the two camps were formally united as one, and the young "city" christened Kingsley.

The sport detectives remained and took an active part in the conduct of the Occident mine, and within a few months Cool Creede and Rosa Lee followed an example set by Jasper Fairfax and Adah Kingsley.

That is to say, they were publicly married.

Following this, Basil Drumm hastened to woo Jessie Fairfax, and thus the two mines were finally consolidated.

And so ends the story.

THE END.

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